



Thai blasts linked to human traffickers

Police say captured suspect part of a gang, attack might have been triggered by crackdown on them

AFP, Bangkok

Thai police yesterday said a foreigner arrested in connection with the deadly Bangkok bombing was part of a people-smuggling gang who may have launched an attack in response to a crackdown on their trade.

The unidentified foreigner, who is being held in military custody at an undisclosed location, was seized during a Saturday morning raid on a flat on the eastern outskirts of Bangkok.

Investigators say he was found with bomb-making equipment and dozens of fake passports.

National police spokesman Prawut Thavornsiri said officers believed the suspect was part of a crime group who helped illegal migrants obtain counterfeit documents -- and that the bomb attack was retaliation for a recent crackdown by Thai authorities.

"They (the gang) are unsatisfied with police arresting illegal entrants," he told

Channel 3 in a telephone interview without elaborating how investigators knew this.

"It's a network that fakes nationalities and sends them (illegal migrants) on to third countries," he added.

The blast that hit the Erawan shrine in a busy Bangkok shopping district on August 17 was Thailand's worst single mass-casualty attack, killing 20 people. Thai authorities have played down any suggestion the attack was launched by international terrorists.

Authorities have yet to say what nationality the detained man is but they believe he had accomplices for whom they are now searching. The manhunt has focused on a prime suspect, described as a foreign man, who was captured on security footage and leaving a bag at the shrine moments before the blast. Authorities have not yet said whether they believe the suspect now detained is the same as the man in the video footage.



MIGRANT EXODUS TO EU Calls grow for action

AFP, Rüsske

Calls multiplied yesterday for Europe finally to get to grips with its ever-deadlier migrant crisis after Austria's horrific truck tragedy and a tragic boat disaster in the Mediterranean, as people continued to pour into Hungary from Serbia despite a newly completed razor-wire barrier.

Hungarian police said a fifth suspected human trafficker had been arrested over Thursday's gruesome discovery of 71 decomposing corpses in an abandoned truck on an Austrian motorway. Three children saved from another vehicle meanwhile left hospital.

Pope Francis yesterday called for "effective cooperation" against "crimes that offend all humanity".

The truck tragedy, plus yet another Mediterranean shipwreck claiming at least 111 lives, have served as chilling reminders of Europe's failure to cope with the influx of hundreds of thousands of migrants.

The United Nations estimates 300,000 people have fled conflict and hardship in the Middle East and Africa for a better life in Europe this year alone. Millions more sit in camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.

Some 2,500 have died in the treacherous journey, most drowning in the waters of the Mediterranean after being crammed into unseaworthy boats.

"Europe needs to stop being moved and start moving," Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi said, calling again for a fairer distribution

of migrants among the European Union's 28 members.

Germany, France and Britain made a joint call for an urgent meeting of EU interior and justice ministers in the next two weeks to take "immediate action" and find "concrete steps".

French Prime Minister Manuel Valls said that people "fleeing war, persecution, torture, oppression, must be welcomed" and should be treated with "dignity".

Balkans -- Macedonia called a state of emergency two weeks ago -- and enter EU member Hungary.

From Hungary most want to travel onwards to prosperous western Europe, particularly Germany and Sweden.

Hungary has responded by completing on Saturday a barrier of three rolls of Nato-standard razor wire along the entire 175-kilometre (110-mile) border with Serbia, patrolled by border police with dogs and 4x4s.

Right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban's government is also building a four-metre-high fence and wants to stiffen penalties for people entering illegally.

The barrier is not proving much use, however, with police saying Sunday that 3,080 migrants crossed over on Saturday, the second-highest daily total. The barrier is littered with pieces of torn clothing.

The five people now in custody in Hungary over the Austrian lorry are believed by police to be low-ranking members of one of the numerous and often unscrupulous human-trafficking gangs that extract exorbitant amounts of money to transport migrants.

The four already in detention on Saturday said they were innocent as a court in Hungary remanded them in custody until September 29.

The 7.5-tonne truck found in Austria contained the decomposing bodies of 59 men, eight women, a toddler and three young boys, provoking international revulsion.



Anti-racism protesters stage a sit-in during a rally welcoming migrants in Dresden, Germany on Saturday.

DEVELOPMENTS
EU powers call for urgent meeting to address crisis
France slams East European nations for their attitude to migrants, says Europe should accept people fleeing war, persecution
New arrest in Hungary over Austria death truck
Pope says event in Austria 'offends humanity'

And French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius slammed as "scandalous" the attitude of certain EU members in eastern Europe in refusing to accept more migrants.

If the migrants manage to reach Greece, large numbers then trek up through the countries of the western

NEWS IN brief

Rice makes surprise visit to Pakistan

Amid rising tensions and firing on the Line of Control, US National Security Adviser Susan Rice is in Islamabad for a day-long visit to discuss "regional security issues", sources in Islamabad said. Rice is expected to discuss the the India-Pakistan situation, US' decision to hold military funding over Pakistan's lack of action against the Haqqani network, the suspended talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's visit to the US in September.

Housing complex fire in Saudi kills 11

At least 11 people were killed and 219 injured in Saudi Arabia yesterday when a fire broke out at a residential complex in the eastern city of Khobar housing employees of oil giant Saudi Aramco, authorities said. It added that several of the injured were in a "critical condition" and that the casualties were from "various nationalities," without giving details.

'Largest ever' Med gas field found off Egypt

Italian energy giant ENI yesterday announced the discovery of the "largest ever" offshore natural gas field in the Mediterranean inside Egypt's territorial waters. The discovery, confirmed by Egypt's oil ministry, could hold a potential 30 trillion cubic feet (850 billion cubic metres) of lean gas in an area of about 100 square kilometres (40 square miles), it said in a statement.

Attack on airport kills 1 in SW Pakistan

Gunmen armed with automatic weapons early yesterday attacked a small airport in Pakistan's remote and restive southwest province of Baluchistan, killing an officer and abducting another, officials said.

ISIS in Syria executed over 90 last month

AFP, Beirut

The Islamic State jihadist group has executed more than 90 people, a third of them civilians, over the past month in areas of war-torn Syria under its control, a monitoring group said yesterday.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 32 civilians were among 91 people executed for "crimes" in the jihadist group's self-proclaimed caliphate between July 29 and August 29.

The toll included ISIS members, rebel fighters and forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad.

Witchcraft, homosexual acts and working with the US-led coalition fighting ISIS in Iraq and Syria are among "crimes" punishable by death for the group.

Since it announced its "caliphate" in June 2014, ISIS has swept across Syria, seizing swathes of land in central Hama and Homs provinces, Deir Ezzor and Hasakeh in the east, and the north's Raqa and Aleppo.

According to the Britain-based Observatory, the latest monthly toll has brought to 3,156 people the number of ISIS executions in Syria since the caliphate was announced.

The number includes 1,841 civilians.

ISIS has become notorious for its gruesome displays of violence, often shown in videos posted on the Internet, including beheadings, stoning and pushing victims off rooftops.



People shout slogans as they hold banners during an anti-government rally in front of the National Diet (background/top R) in Tokyo yesterday to protest against Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's controversial security bills which would expand the remit of the country's armed forces. Tens of thousands of people took part in the rallies held around the Diet.

Saudi-led air strike kills 36 Yemenis

REUTERS, Sanaa

An air strike by warplanes from a Saudi-led coalition killed 36 civilians working at a bottling plant in the northern Yemeni province of Hajjah yesterday, residents said.

In another air raid on the capital Sanaa, residents said four civilians were killed when a bomb hit their house near a military base in the south of the city.

The attacks were the latest in an air campaign launched in March an alliance made up mainly of Gulf Arab states in support of the exiled government in its fight against Houthi forces allied to Iran.

"The process of recovering the bodies is finished now. The corpses of 36 workers, many of them burnt or in pieces, were pulled out after an air strike hit the plant this morning," resident Issa Ahmed told Reuters by phone from the site in Hajjah.

A Saudi military spokesman did not immediately respond to Reuters requests for comment on the reported attacks.

Human rights group Amnesty International said in a report this month that the campaign had left a "bloody trail of civilian death" which could amount to war crimes.

AL-JAZEERA JOURNO VERDICT Greste calls for Sisi pardon

AFP, Cairo

Australian Al-Jazeera reporter Peter Greste yesterday called for Egypt's president to pardon him and two colleagues handed prison sentences in a shock ruling that sparked international condemnation and which he described as "politically motivated".

The Cairo court said Greste, along with Canadian Mohamed Fahmy and Egyptian producer Baher Mohamed, had broadcast "false" news that had harmed Egypt and sentenced them to three years in jail.

The case has become an embarrassment for Egyptian

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who has said he wished the reporters had been deported rather than put on trial.

He may pardon them if he chooses.

"It is now up to President Sisi to do what he said he would do from the outset and that is pardon us if we were ever convicted," Greste, who was tried in absentia after being deported early this year, told reporters in Sydney yesterday.

The three journalists were sentenced to between seven and 10 years in jail last year, but an appeals court in January granted them a retrial, saying the verdict had not been backed by evidence.

They were arrested in December 2013, months after the military overthrew Islamist president Mohamed Morsi and launched a deadly crackdown on his supporters.

Fahmy and Mohamed were in the Cairo court for the verdict.

Meanwhile, Egypt's foreign ministry yesterday summoned the British ambassador over his criticism of prison sentences.

The verdict sparked condemnation worldwide.

Canada urged Egypt to allow for Fahmy's immediate return to Canada, after he renounced his Egyptian nationality in order to be deported like his Australian colleague.

Saudi women register to run for election

AFP, Jeddah

Saudi women for the first time began to register as candidates yesterday for municipal polls in the ultra-conservative Muslim kingdom where they face a host of restrictions, including a driving ban.

Earlier this month, in another first, women started to register as voters at centres run by all-female staff, separate from registration facilities for Saudi males.

Women in the Gulf state, which applies a strict segregation of the sexes, are banned from driving and have to cover in public from head to toe.

They also have to obtain the consent of a male guardian to travel, work, apply for a passport or to marry.

The late king Abdullah in 2011 granted women the right to vote and run as candidates in this year's local elections, saying: "We refuse to marginalise women's role in Saudi society."

Saudi-funded newspaper Al-Hayat said earlier this month that around 200 women had expressed interest in running as candidates in the December 12 vote.

Candidate registration is to run until September 17, while voter registration ends on September 14. Out of 1,263 polling stations in 284 municipalities across the monarchy, 424 have been reserved for women voters.



The exterior of the HI-SEAS habitat on the northern slope of Mauna Loa in Hawaii is pictured where six people are about to shut themselves inside for a year.

Year-long 'Mars isolation' begins

AFP, Miami

Six people shut themselves inside a dome for a year in Hawaii on Friday, in the longest US isolation experiment aimed at helping Nasa prepare for a pioneering journey to Mars.

The crew includes a French astrobiologist, a German physicist and four Americans -- a pilot, an architect, a doctor/journalist and a soil scientist.

They are based on a barren, northern slope of Mauna Loa, living inside a dome that is 36 feet in diameter and 20 feet tall.

In a place with no animals and little vegetation around, they closed themselves in at 3:00 pm Hawaii time Saturday, marking the official start to the 12-month mission.

The men and women have their own

small rooms, with space for a sleeping cot and desk, and will spend their days eating food like powdered cheese and canned tuna, only going outside if dressed in a spacesuit, and having limited access to the Internet.

Any astronauts that go to Mars are facing a trip that would last far longer than the six months that humans typically spend at the orbiting International Space Station.

Nasa's current technology can send a robotic mission to the Red Planet in eight months, and the space agency estimates that a human mission would take between one and three years.

So what kind of person wants to spend a year this way? Crew member Sheyna Gifford described the team as "six people who want to change the world by making it possible for people to leave it at will," she wrote on her blog, LivefromMars.life.