

Plots to sell nuke material to IS foiled

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Smuggling gangs with suspected Russian links tried to sell nuclear material to Islamic extremists from ISIS, an investigation has found.

In the backwaters of Moldova, authorities working with the FBI interrupted four attempts in the past five years by the gangs that sought to sell radioactive material to Middle Eastern extremists. The Associated Press news agency learned. The latest known case came in February this year, when a smuggler offered a huge cache of deadly cesium — enough to contaminate several city blocks — and specifically sought a buyer from ISIS.

The smuggler, Valentin Grossu, offered the supply of cesium to what he thought was an ISIS representative in exchange for €2.5 million, according to the investigation. The representative was in fact an informant.

"You can make a dirty bomb, which would be perfect for the Islamic State," the smuggler said in a meeting at a nightclub in the Moldovan capital of Chisinau. "If you have a connection with them, the business will go smoothly."

After initial suspicions and 20 meetings, Grossu was persuaded the informant was an authentic ISIS representative and the pair met to exchange money, in a sting operation that ended up with Grossu in jail.

The investigation also uncovered an attempt to sell bomb-grade uranium to a real buyer from the Middle East.

In that operation, wiretaps and interviews with investigators show, a middleman for the gang repeatedly ranted with hatred for America as he focused on smuggling the essential material for an atomic bomb and blueprints for a dirty bomb to a Middle Eastern buyer.

In wiretaps, videotaped arrests, photographs of bomb-grade material, documents and interviews, AP found that smugglers are explicitly targeting buyers who are enemies of the West. The developments represent the fulfillment of a long-feared scenario in which organized crime gangs are trying to link up with groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda — both of which have made clear their ambition to use weapons of mass destruction.

The sting operations involved a partnership between the FBI and a small group of Moldovan investigators, who over five years went from near total ignorance of the black market to wrapping up four sting operations. Informants and police posing as connected gangsters penetrated the smuggling networks, using old-fashioned undercover tactics as well as high-tech gear from radiation detectors to clothing threaded with recording devices.



Migrants queue in the compound outside the Berlin Office of Health and Social Affairs as they wait to register in Berlin, Germany yesterday. Inset, A Syrian man holds his baby as he walks past a pile of life jackets after arriving with other refugees and migrants on the Greek island of Lesbos.

PHOTO: REUTERS

EU warships start smuggler patrols

AFP, Strasbourg

European warships in the Mediterranean launched a new operation yesterday to catch migrant smugglers as the leaders of Germany and France were to push for further EU action to cope with the refugee crisis.

The military mission dubbed Operation Sophia involves six naval vessels in international waters off Libya with the power to stop, board, seize and destroy traffickers' boats in a bid to curb the worst crisis of its kind since World War II.

"Assets will conduct boarding, search, seizure and diversion, on the high seas, of vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking," the EU mission said in a statement.

An Italian aircraft carrier, a French frigate and one British, one Spanish and two German ships are all involved in the mission,

which follows in the footsteps of EU anti-piracy operations on the Horn of Africa.

"We follow the traffickers and want to arrest them and seize their ships," Captain Stefan Klatt, who commands the Werra, one of the German ships that is taking part in the operation, told AFP.

The EU gave the go-ahead for the operation in international waters in September, but its ships are not, for now, allowed to pursue traffickers into Libyan waters.

Greek police said yesterday they have arrested 12 members of a gang that forged documents for migrants trying to reach central Europe, hailing the swoop as an important blow against a major people-smuggling operation.

Meanwhile, Spain's King Felipe VI pleaded with Europeans not to let down the waves of refugees seeking peace and prosperity in the EU.

MIGRANTS CRISIS
Greek police smash document-forging gang
Spanish king pleads with Europe not to let refugees down

Failure in Syria risks total war

Says Hollande; US insists no cooperation on air strike

AFP, Strasbourg

Failure to act in Syria risks stoking a "total war" in the Middle East, French President Francois Hollande said in a landmark speech to the European Parliament alongside German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

"What happens in Syria concerns Europe, what happens there will determine the balance of the whole region for a long time," Hollande told European lawmakers in Strasbourg.

"If we leave these religious clashes between Sunnis and Shiites, they will grow. Don't think we will be sheltered, this will be a total war."

"We have to construct in Syria, with all those who can contribute, a political future which gives the Syrian people an alternative to Bashar or Daesh," Hollande said, using another name for IS.

Meanwhile, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter insisted yesterday that the US is not cooperating with Russia over Moscow's air strikes in Syria beyond basic safety precautions, describing Russia's action there as fundamentally mistaken.

"I have said before that we believed that Russia has the wrong strategy -- they continue to hit targets that are not ISIL. We believe this is a fundamental mistake," Carter told a press conference in Rome, referring to the Islamic State group.

NEWS IN brief

MSF demands Kunduz war crimes probe

AFP, Kabul

Medical charity MSF yesterday demanded an international probe into a deadly US air strike on an Afghan hospital, after reports said Nato's top regional commander thought American forces broke their own rules of engagement. Three separate investigations -- by the US military, Nato and Afghan officials -- are currently under way into Saturday's catastrophic strike in the northern Afghan city of Kunduz.

Trump is a 'master brander': Bill Clinton

AFP, Washington

Former US president Bill Clinton attributed outspoken Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump's current success in surveys to his skills as a "master brander" but said his appeal could be short-lived. Speaking late Tuesday on the CBS "Late Show," host Stephen Colbert asked Clinton to explain why he thought that Trump -- currently leading a pack of 15 Republican presidential hopefuls -- was doing so well.

Ghulam Ali's concert in Mumbai cancelled

THE HINDU ONLINE

The Indian Shiv Sena is at it again. This time, the party has forced the organisers to cancel the Mumbai concert of renowned Pakistani ghazal singer Ghulam Ali. Earlier, the party had warned the administration of Shanmukhanand Hall, where the concert was to be held, to cancel the show as the singer belongs to "a country which is firing bullets at Indians."

NEPAL CHARTER ROW

Govt, protesters discuss size of states

AP, Kathmandu

Negotiators from Nepal's government and the main group protesting the country's new constitution discussed the main issue of the size of proposed states yesterday, but said little progress was made in their second day of talks.

The United Democratic Madhesi Front insisted on immediate changes to the size of the states specified in the constitution, while government negotiators said changes could only be made through an appropriate legal process.

Both sides agreed to discuss the issue among themselves and meet again tomorrow.

The constitution approved last month divides Nepal into seven new states, with some borders slicing through the Madhesis' ancestral homeland in the southern plains along the border with India. Ethnic Madhesis, along with several other small ethnic groups, want the states to be larger and to be given more autonomy over local matters.

"They have said the state is the main issue on which we need to reach an agreement, but we told them that this needs to be done through a process following the constitution," government minister Mahesh Acharya told reporters after yesterday's meeting.

Acharya said changes to the seven states can only be made by a commission that needs to be set up.



Police officers detain a man during early morning raids in western Sydney, Australia yesterday in this handout courtesy of New South Wales Police. Four people were arrested over the terror-linked murder of a police employee after coordinated raids by more than 200 officers.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Khamenei bans negotiations with the US

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday banned any further negotiations between Iran and the United States, putting the brakes on moderates hoping to end Iran's isolation after reaching a nuclear deal with world powers in July.

Khamenei, the highest authority in the Islamic Republic, already said last month there would be no more talks with the United States after the nuclear deal, but has not previously declared an outright ban.

His statements directly contradict those of moderate Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who says his government is ready to hold talks with the United States on how to resolve the conflict in Syria, where the two countries back opposing sides.

"Negotiations with the United States open gates to their economic, cultural, political and security influence. Even during the nuclear negotiations they tried to harm our national interests," Khamenei was quoted as saying on his website.

"Our negotiators were vigilant but the Americans took advantage of a few chances," he said.

Although he supported the last 18 months of negotiations, Khamenei has not publicly endorsed the nuclear agreement with the United States, Germany, France, Britain, China and Russia that settled a standoff of more than a decade.

The West feared Iran wanted to develop nuclear weapons, suspicions Tehran denies.

I could be the last one

Dalai Lama tells CNN

CNN ONLINE

The Chinese government cares more about the institution of the Dalai Lama than the man who carries that name, the 14th Dalai Lama told CNN's Christiane Amanpour.

"I have no concern," he told Amanpour in London, adding that it is "possible" he would be the last Dalai Lama.

The Chinese government still considers him a political leader, the Dalai Lama said, as the previous men carrying that title were for centuries. But since 2011, he told Amanpour, he is only a spiritual leader. "I totally retired from political responsibility -- not only myself retired, but also (a) four-century-old tradition."

Buddhism in Tibet far precedes the Dalai Lama, and "in the future, Tibetan Buddhism will carry (on) without the Dalai Lama."

Decades ago, he told Amanpour, "I publicly, formally, officially -- I announced the very institution of the Dalai Lama should continue or not -- (it

is) up to Tibetan people."

Amanpour spoke with the Dalai Lama shortly before he was hospitalized and forced to cancel several appearances in the United States. Now back in India, he has assured his followers he is in "excellent condition."

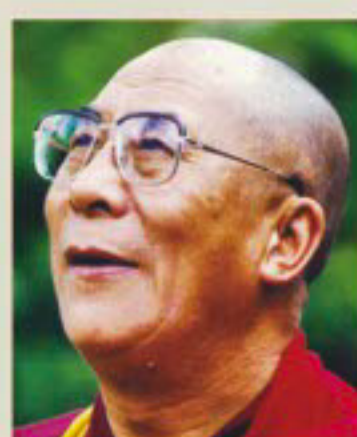
The Chinese government is continually at odds with the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists. Chinese officials label him an "anti-China splittist," alleging that he wants Tibet -- now a region of China -- to become an independent country.

"We are not seeking independence. Historically, we are (an) independent country. That's what all historians know -- except for the Chinese official historian; they do not accept that."

Labeling him a "splittist," the Dalai Lama said, fits with China's "hardliner policy."

"Past is past. We are looking (to the) future."

Tibet, he said, is "materially backward," and benefits from being part of China.



Iraq forces retake areas in Ramadi

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi forces have retaken several areas north and west of Ramadi as efforts to close in on the Anbar provincial capital seized by jihadists in May intensify, officials said yesterday.

An operation involving 2,000 troops backed by air strikes from the US-led coalition led to the recapture of several neighbourhoods from the Islamic State group. A brigadier general from the Anbar operations command said those included Zankura, Albu Jleib, Al-Adnaniyah and parts of Albu Risha and an area known as Kilometre 5.

"The Iraqi security forces also took control of the main road west of Ramadi and they are now using it to support the forces positioned to liberate Ramadi," Adhal Fahdawi, a member of the provincial council, told AFP.

I can be leader even if not president

Suu Kyi says in an interview

AFP, New Delhi

Aung San Suu Kyi intends to lead a new Myanmar government if her party wins historic polls despite being barred from the presidency, she says in an interview broadcast yesterday.

"If the NLD wins the elections and we form a government, I'm going to be the leader of that government whether or not I'm the president," Suu Kyi told the India Today television channel.

"The leader of the NLD government will have to be me because I am the leader of my party," she said, refusing to elaborate on any possible arrangement.

The November 8 parliamentary elections are seen as a key test of democratic progress in Myanmar, which in 2011 emerged from a half-century of military rule.

The president is chosen by parliament, including military members, in a vote after the election and must cease party politics on taking up the post.

He or she is responsible for forming the government, including a cabinet, making key regional appointments and signing off on parliamentary legislation.



PHOTO: REUTERS