

Cryptic warning issued ahead of attacks

AFP, Jakarta

The Islamic State group issued a cryptic warning before multiple blasts hit the Indonesian capital Jakarta yesterday, killing at least seven people, police said.

"The warning said there will be a concert in Indonesia and it will be international news," National police spokesman Anton Charliyan told a local radio station.

He did not give any further details, or say when the warning was issued.

Police foiled several terror plots in Indonesia last month, with some believed to be linked to IS.

Hundreds of Indonesians are feared to have joined the jihadist group, which has taken over vast swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria.

Qaeda chief urges attacks in Saudi

Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri has called for revenge attacks in Saudi Arabia and on the West after the kingdom's execution of some 40 jihadists, according to a message posted online.

In the message, Zawahiri called on supporters to attack "the Crusader-Zionist coalition whenever possible" and urged Saudis to overthrow the kingdom's ruling family.

"Is it not about time that you get rid of this rotten regime... that will never defend you?" he said.

Worst fears came true

AFP, Jakarta

A "Paris-style" suicide strike on the Indonesian capital Thursday confirmed Southeast Asian governments' worst fears -- that citizens returning from fighting alongside the Islamic State group in the Middle East could launch attacks at home.

Regional nations have been warning for months of the possibility of attack, mirroring concerns expressed by European authorities fearful of the intentions of people returning home from conflict.

PKK bombing kills six in southeastern Turkey

REUTERS, Cinar

Six people were killed, including three children, and 39 wounded yesterday in a car bomb attack blamed on Kurdish militants that ripped through a police station and an adjacent housing complex for officers' families in southeastern Turkey.

Two civilians were killed in the initial bombing by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the town of Cinar and three more lost their lives when a building collapsed due to damage caused by the blast, the governor's office of Diyarbakir province said in a statement.

One policeman was also killed, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said, adding: "I vehemently condemn the attack."

Security sources told AFP the victims killed in the building collapse included a five-month-old baby, a boy aged five and a girl aged one.

The late-night blast in Cinar caused huge damage to the residential building used by the police officers and their families, with the entire outer wall blown out, an AFP correspondent said.

The governor's office said 14 people were injured in the initial bomb blast while 25 were wounded in the building collapse, including five who had been rescued from the rubble by emergency teams.

The PKK launched an insurgency against the Turkish state in 1984, initially fighting for Kurdish independence although it now presses more for greater autonomy and rights for the country's largest ethnic minority.

The conflict has left tens of thousands of people dead.

On Tuesday, 10 German tourists were killed in Istanbul in a suicide attack by a suspected Islamic State militant.

Since the PKK launched its insurgency in 1984, fighting has stayed largely in the countryside, but the latest violence has focused on urban areas, where the PKK youth wing has set up barricades and dug trenches to keep out security forces.



Indonesian police place body bags next to victims outside a traffic police outpost after a series of explosions hit central Jakarta, yesterday; a foreign national lies wounded surrounded by security and emergency workers; and an Indonesian policeman fires his handgun towards terrorists.



PHOTO: AFP

Worst fears came true

AFP, Jakarta

The threat of returning Southeast Asian fighters radicalised in the Iraq/Syria region (is) also another factor of concern, together with the possibility of self-radicalised lone wolves appearing in the scene."

Yesterday's attacks left five attackers and two civilians, including a Westerner, dead and 19 others wounded.

National police spokesman Anton Charliyan told AFP that authorities had a "strong suspicion" an IS-linked group carried out the assault and that it was designed to replicate the

November strike on Paris that claimed 130 lives.

Although the toll was much lower, the selection of soft targets in the heart of the capital terrified citizens, and social media erupted with disturbing images and video footage, and the hashtag #KamiTidaTakut (We are not afraid).

The strike was launched just weeks after Indonesia issued a heightened alert and arrested several suspected militants, some of them from IS-linked cells.

The Soufan Group, a New York-based security consultancy, says that of the 500-700 Indonesians who travelled abroad to join IS's self-proclaimed caliphate across swathes of Syria and Iraq, scores have since returned.

The threat posed by returning foreign fighters is not a new one for Indonesia.

The country's counter-terror chief has recalled that Indonesians who trained with Islamic militants in Afghanistan in the 1990s came back and launched terror attacks, including the 2002 Bali bombings.

IS'S JAKARTA ATTACKS



Regional nations have been warning for months of the possibility of attack, mirroring concerns expressed by European authorities fearful of the intentions of people returning home from conflict.

The blasts and gunfire that rocked Jakarta came after six years of relative calm, following a government crack-down that weakened the country's most dangerous homegrown Islamic networks.

"We know that (IS) has the desire to declare a province in this region and there are groups in this region... that have pledged allegiance to (IS)," said Kumar Ramakrishna, an expert on southeast Asian militant groups at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

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Tunisian women take part in a rally on Habib Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis yesterday, to mark the fifth anniversary of the 2011 revolution. PHOTO: AFP

WAR ON ISLAMIC STATE

Jihadists retreating in Iraq

Says France; coalition to meet in Paris next week

AFP, Paris

Members of the US-led coalition fighting Islamic State will meet in Paris next week to reinforce efforts against the group, France's defence minister said on Thursday, adding that the militants were clearly retreating in Iraq.

France was the first country to join U.S.-led air strikes in Iraq. Since the Paris attacks by Islamic State in November, it has stepped up its aerial bombing campaign of the group, including in Syria, contributing about 20 percent of coalition strikes.

"We struck last night in Mosul on a Daesh telecommunications centre, a propaganda centre. What we can say today is that Daesh is retreating in Iraq," Jean-Yves Le Drian said on BFM TV, referring to the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State.

The minister said he would host his U.S., British and German counterparts in Paris next week to refine strategy and discuss tactics.

"We'll see how we can intensify our efforts in Iraq and Syria," he said, adding

that Islamic State was on the back foot in Iraq and that French jets had struck seven times since Monday.

He said that at some point the Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga forces supported by the coalition would need to launch the battle for Mosul, the largest city held by Islamic State in Iraq.

"It's very complicated. We will have to ensure the Iraqi and Kurdish forces are sufficiently battle-hardened to lead this battle," Le Drian said.

French officials have this week been critical of Russian strikes in Syria with Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius saying Moscow had to immediately stop bombing civilians, something that was hindering efforts to hold peace talks later this month.

"If the principle Russian objective is to fight Islamic State, then they must first hit Islamic State. At the moment that is not the case, and there is a very strong tendency for it to strike rebels, the moderate opposition fighting (Syrian President) Bashar al-Assad," he said.

'Comfort women' were 'prostitutes'!

AFP, Tokyo

A Japanese lawmaker yesterday said wartime sex slaves forced to work for Japan's Imperial Army were "professional prostitutes", before he was forced to retract the remarks and issue an apology, local media reported.

The comments from a senior member of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's ruling party provoked criticism from Seoul, just two weeks after Tokyo offered an apology and a one-billion yen (\$8.5 million) payment to surviving South Korean women under an agreement both nations described as "final and irreversible".

The plight of the "comfort women" -- a euphemistic expression used in Japan and South Korea to describe them -- is a hugely emotional issue that has for decades marred ties between Seoul and Tokyo, which ruled the Korean peninsula harshly as a colony from 1910 to 1945.

Up to 200,000 women in Asia, many of them Koreans but also from China, the Philippines and what is now Indonesia, and others, are estimated to have been forced to have sex to Japanese soldiers during World War II.

The landmark agreement has sparked an angry reaction from some of the victims and South Korean activists, who take issue with Japan's refusal to accept formal legal responsibility for the sex slavery.

Liberal Democratic Party lawmaker Yoshitaka Sakurada initially made the comments during a meeting with 10 other LDP lawmakers yesterday morning.

Oscars 2016: Revenant tops nominations list

BBC ONLINE

The Revenant is leading the race for the 2016 Oscars with 12 nominations, with Mad Max: Fury Road scoring 10.

Both films are nominated for best picture, along with The Big Short, Bridge of Spies, Brooklyn, The Martian, Room and Spotlight.

Eddie Redmayne, hoping to repeat his 2015 success, competes against Leonardo DiCaprio for the best actor award.

Charlotte Rampling is in the running for best actress, while Kate Winslet is up for best supporting actress.

Redmayne, nominated this year for his role as transgender pioneer Lili Elbe in The Danish Girl, won the 2015 Academy Award for his performance as Stephen Hawking in

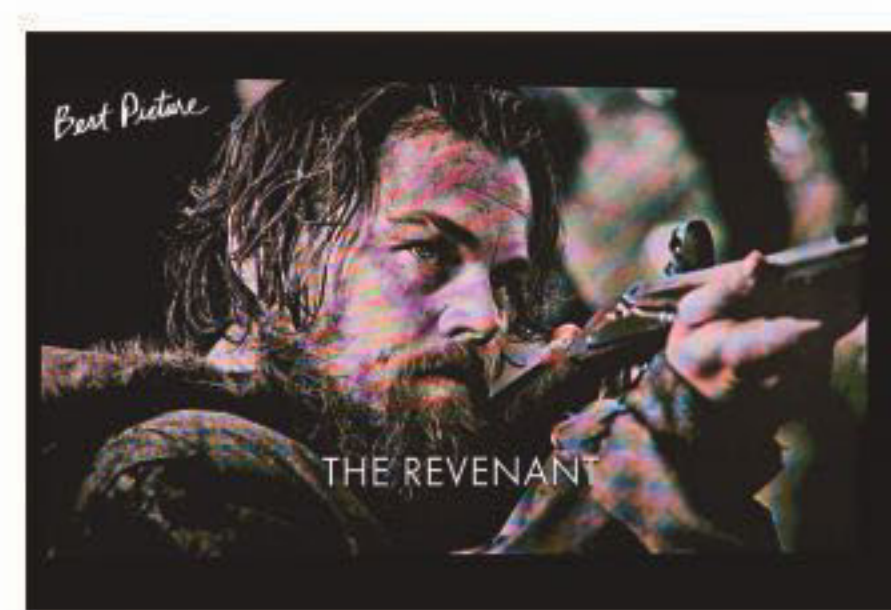
The Theory of Everything.

DiCaprio, the star of survival epic The Revenant, has been nominated four times but has yet to win an Academy Award.

The best actor category also sees nominations for Michael Fassbender for biopic Steve Jobs, Matt Damon for space saga The Martian and Bryan Cranston for Trumbo, in which he portrays real-life Hollywood screenwriter Dalton Trumbo.

Veteran British actress Rampling, who receives a nod for marital drama 45 Years, faces competition in the best actress category from Cate Blanchett for Carol, Brie Larson for Room, Jennifer Lawrence for Joy and Saoirse Ronan for Brooklyn.

The 88th Academy Awards, hosted by Chris Rock will be held at Hollywood's Dolby Theatre on 28 February.



Aid convoy heads to Madaya

AFP, Damascus

A convoy of about 50 aid trucks left Damascus yesterday for the hunger-stricken Syrian town of Madaya, according to an AFP journalist.

The trucks contain flour, medical aid and hygiene products for residents of the town, where more than two dozen people have reportedly starved to death since December.

Madaya's 40,000 residents have suffered a crippling government siege that has drawn sharp condemnation from the United Nations.

A convoy of humanitarian assistance entered Madaya on Monday, the first aid that the town had received in nearly four months.

Tax on samosas? No way

AFP, New Delhi

One of India's poorest states has said it will impose a "luxury tax" on samosas -- one of the country's most popular snacks -- sparking widespread outrage.

The Bihar government announced plans this week for the new levy to offset an anticipated plunge in the state's revenues when a ban on alcohol sales comes into force in April.

Cosmetics, perfumes and some sweets were also among the "luxury" items to be taxed at 13.5 percent, but the decision to include the much-loved pastry snack was met with bafflement on social media.

Opposition politicians in the eastern state, which is also one of India's most populous, warned the tax would hurt ordinary people.

The row recalls the 2012 controversy over Britain's plan to extend levies on takeaway food to Cornish pasties and other hot snacks.

The government was forced to back down after a public outcry over what became known as the "pasty tax".

