

2 terror suspects shot dead in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian police yesterday shot dead two terror suspects and arrested two more, only days after foiling separate plans by an IS-linked group for a Christmas-time suicide bombing near the capital.

The pair were fatally shot at a house in Purwakarta 100 kilometres east of the capital Jakarta after allegedly resisting arrest.

Police raided the house after arresting and interrogating two men yesterday morning. The suspects attacked officers with knives but gave up after being shot and wounded, police said.

After being interrogated, they led police to a house at a separate location where two more members of the group were hiding.

Several sharp weapons were seized from the house but no explosives were found.

Police said the suspects and the dead men were members of the Jamaah Ansharul Daulah group, a local militant outfit which supports the Islamic State group and was responsible for a November attack on a church which killed a toddler on Borneo island.



(From top, clockwise) Pope Francis kisses a figurine of baby Jesus as he celebrates a mass on Christmas eve marking the birth of Jesus Christ at St Peter's basilica in Vatican; Christian devotees pray during a Christmas mass in Colombo; and people arrive to attend a Christmas mass in Baghdad amid tight security yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Xmas 'hostage' to materialism

Says Pope in his Christmas message

AGENCIES

Pope Francis said that Christmas had been "taken hostage" by dazzling materialism that puts God in the shadows and blinds many to the needs of the hungry, the migrants and the war weary.

Francis, leading the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics into Christmas for the fourth time since his election in 2013, said in his Christmas Eve homily that a world often obsessed with gifts, feasting and self-centeredness needed more humility.

At the solemn but joyous service, attended by some 10,000 people as well as dozens of cardinals and bishops, Francis said the many in the wealthy world had to be reminded that the message of Christmas was humility, simplicity and mystery.

"Jesus was born rejected by some and regarded by many others with indifference," he said.

"Today also the same indifference can exist, when Christmas becomes a feast where the protagonists are ourselves, rather than Jesus; when the lights of commerce cast the light of God into the shadows; when we are concerned for gifts, but cold toward those who are marginalised."

He then added in unscripted remarks: "This worldliness has taken Christmas hostage. It needs to be freed."

Pope Francis urged peace around the world in his traditional Christmas address yesterday, calling for weapons in Syria to fall silent and offering comfort to victims of terrorism.

Addressing tens of thousands of worshippers gathered at the Vatican to hear the pontiff give his fourth "Urbi et Orbi" (To the City and The World) message, Francis said "far too much blood has been spilled" in Syria's nearly six-year war.

He also urged Israelis and Palestinians to "have the courage and the determination to write a new page of history, where hate and revenge give way to the will to build together a future of mutual understanding and harmony."

The Pope also urged peace in Iraq, Libya and Yemen -- "where their peoples suffer war and the brutality of terrorism" -- and expressed hope for an end to conflicts in Africa, including in Nigeria and South Sudan.

Israel to re-assess UN ties

Cuts fundings to UN bodies; summons envoys of countries that supported the move

AGENCIES

Israel will re-assess its ties with the United Nations following the adoption by the Security Council of a resolution demanding an end to Israeli settlement building, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said yesterday.

Israel yesterday summoned representatives of states that supported the move, as it said cutting civilian coordination with Palestinians by way of rebuke.

The vote was able to pass the 15-member council on Friday because the United States broke with a long-standing approach of diplomatically shielding Israel and did not wield its veto power as it had on many times before - a decision that Netanyahu called "shameful".

"I instructed the Foreign Ministry to complete within a month a re-evaluation of all our contacts with the United Nations, including the Israeli funding of UN institutions and the presence of UN representatives in Israel," Netanyahu said in broadcast remarks.

"I have already instructed to stop about 30 million shekels (\$7.8 million) in funding to five UN institutions, five bodies, that are especially hostile to Israel ... and there is more to come," he said.

The Israeli leader did not name the institutions or offer any further details.

Defying heavy pressure from long-time ally Israel and President-elect Donald Trump for Washington to use its veto, the United States abstained in the Security Council decision, which passed with 14 votes in favor.

UN RESOLUTION AGAINST SETTLEMENTS



Meanwhile, foreign ministry spokesman Emmanuel Nahshon said that the 14 envoys of UN Security Council members will visit the ministry in Jerusalem throughout the day. The US envoy was not summoned.

The resolution demands "Israel immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including east Jerusalem."

It says settlements have "no legal validity" and are "dangerously imperilling the viability of the two-state solution."

Netanyahu yesterday repeated the Israeli claim that US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry were behind the resolution.

"We have no doubt that the Obama administration initiated it, stood behind it, coordinated the drafts and demanded to pass it," Netanyahu said at the beginning of the weekly cabinet meeting.

While the resolution contains no sanctions, Israeli officials are concerned it could widen the possibility of prosecution at the International Criminal Court.

They are also worried it could encourage some countries to impose sanctions against Israeli settlers and goods produced in the settlements.

Earlier on Sunday, army radio reported that Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman ordered the Israeli security establishment to cease to all cooperation on civilian matters with the Palestinians, while retaining security coordination.

Rightwing Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan said Saturday night that Israel should "announce a full annexation of settlement blocs" in response to the resolution.

Russian jets pound Idlib, rural Aleppo

REUTERS, Amman

Russian jets stepped up strikes on several towns in Syria's rebel-held Idlib province and rural Aleppo two days after the evacuation of rebels from their last pocket in the northern city of Aleppo, rebels and residents said on Saturday.

They said at least eight strikes targeted Binish, Saraqeb and Jisr al-Shaqour - main towns in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib. There were reports of several casualties, mainly among civilians.

Idlib province for months has been a target of Russia's heavy bombing campaign against rebel-held areas. It came even while the former eastern part of Aleppo under insurgent control faced an escalation in aerial raids and shelling until its defences collapsed and the rebels were forced to agree to an evacuation deal.

The Syrian army has hinted the next major campaign after its victory in Aleppo was to rout insurgents in their stronghold of Idlib province, where mainly Islamist brigades operating under a coalition known as Jaish al-Fateh are in control.

Residents and rebels said Russian and Syrian jets also staged heavy strikes on rebel-held parts of western and southern parts of rural Aleppo for the second day. Although the Syrian army, with the help of Iranian-backed militias, was able to take full control of Aleppo city after Russia conducted hundreds of raids that pulverised rebel-held parts, large swathes of western and southern Aleppo countryside remain in rebel hands.

NEWS IN brief

China aircraft carrier to lead Pacific drills

REUTERS, Beijing

China's first aircraft carrier will carry out drills in the Western Pacific, in what the navy called part of routine exercises, amid renewed tension over self-ruled Taiwan that Beijing claims as its own. The navy said in a statement late on Saturday the Liaoning, along with its accompanying fleet, would conduct "exercises far out at sea", without giving details of the location or route.

Pakistan frees 220 Indian fishermen

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan yesterday released 220 Indian fishermen held for trespassing into its territorial waters as a "goodwill gesture" to its nuclear-armed rival India, officials said. The freed fishermen are expected to cross over into India today. Indian and Pakistani fishermen are frequently detained for illegal fishing since the Arabian Sea border is not clearly defined.

French aid worker kidnapped in Mali

AFP, Paris

A Frenchwoman who runs an aid group has been kidnapped in Mali's restive north, the French foreign ministry confirmed yesterday. Sophie Petronin was abducted in the city of Gao on Saturday, the ministry said, adding that French and Malian authorities were working together "to find and free our compatriot as quickly as possible".

Xmas Day typhoon hits Philippines

Tens of thousands evacuated

AFP, Daraga

A powerful typhoon with gusts of up to 235 kilometres (146 miles) an hour hit the Philippines late yesterday, disrupting Christmas celebrations for tens of thousands who fled its approach, officials said.

Typhoon Nock-Ten made landfall in the eastern island province of Catanduanes at 6:30 pm (1030 GMT), the state weather service said.

There were no immediate official reports of damage or casualties from the storm, one of the strongest this year to hit the disaster-prone archipelago on the Pacific Rim.

The military and local governments earlier moved at least 102,000 people from the coasts, provincial officials said, after experts warned of possible huge waves, floods and landslides.

The typhoon was forecast to sweep west and threaten the country's most densely populated areas including the capital Manila today morning.

Some 20 typhoons or lesser storms strike the Philippines each year, routinely killing hundreds of people.



Residents are assisted onto a truck after the local government implemented preemptive evacuations at Barangay Matnog, Daraga, Albay province yesterday, due to the approaching typhoon Nock-Ten.

PHOTO: AFP

CONFlict of interest with business as president

Under pressure, Trump to shut controversial charity

REUTERS, Washington

US President-elect Donald Trump said on Saturday he intends to dissolve his charitable foundation, the Donald J. Trump Foundation, which has been under investigation by the New York attorney general.

Trump gave no timeline for winding down the foundation, but said in a statement that he wanted "to avoid even the appearance of any conflict with my role as President." He directed his counsel to take the necessary steps for the dissolution.

With less than four weeks to his Jan. 20 inauguration, the New York real estate magnate is under increasing pressure to reduce potential conflicts of interest ranging from his vast global business operations to his family's philanthropic work.

Trump has chosen as ambassador to Israel the hardliner David Friedman, who has said Washington will not pressure Israel to curtail settlement building in the occupied West Bank.

This week, Trump said his son Eric would stop raising money for his own foundation over concerns that donors could be seen as buying access to the Trump family. The president-elect said it was a "ridiculous shame" that his son's foundation would stop raising money.

Before Trump's surprising election victory on Nov. 8, New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman in October directed the Donald J. Trump Foundation to stop taking donations, saying the foundation violated state law requiring charitable organizations that solicit outside donations to register with a state office.

Schneiderman's order followed a series of reports in The Washington Post that suggested improprieties by the foundation, including using its funds to settle legal disputes involving Trump businesses.

A spokeswoman for the attorney general's office said on Saturday that Trump should not shutter the foundation while the investigation is ongoing.

The Trump Foundation, which was established in 1988, runs no programs of its own. Instead, it donates to other nonprofit groups such as the Police Athletic League for youths.

Modi greets Sharif on his birthday

PTI, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday greeted his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif on his birthday, notwithstanding the severe chill in relations between the two countries.

"Birthday wishes to Pakistan PM Mr Nawaz Sharif. I pray for his long and healthy life," Modi tweeted.

Sharif turned 67 today.

Last year on this day, Modi had made a huge gesture by travelling to Lahore on an unscheduled visit to wish Sharif personally.

However, the warmth in the ties since then evaporated after terror attack on the airbase in Pathankot on January 1 this year.

WWII bomb forces evacuation of 54,000 in Germany on Xmas

AFP, Berlin

An unwelcome Christmas surprise in southern Germany forced the evacuation of 54,000 people from their homes yesterday after the discovery of a bomb dating from World War II, local authorities said.

It was a British bomb that was found in the city of Augsburg and led to the biggest mobilisation in Germany - around 900 police officers - since the war's end.

The 1.8-tonne explosive had been found on Tuesday during work at a construction site in the centre of the Bavarian city, but authorities planned to defuse the bomb around mid-day Sunday.

"Today I ask everyone concerned to leave the area, if possible by themselves," said Augsburg mayor Kurt Gribi in a video message posted on the city's Twitter account.

Gribi also called for "each person to verify that their relatives, parents and friends have found places to stay outside the (security) zone... Look out for one another."

The defusing could take up to five hours, according to the authorities, who estimate that the evacuees will not be able to return home before the evening.

Admittedly this was an unusual Christmas day in Augsburg, a city spokesman told TV channel n24, adding that hopefully people would voluntarily leave their homes given the expected "force of the explosion" during the defusing of the bomb.

More than 70 years after the end of the war, unexploded bombs are still found buried on German territory, vestiges of the intense bombing campaigns by the Allied forces against Nazi Germany.



Polizeipräsidium Schwaben Nord Fliegerbombe in Augsburg gefunden!

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