

Vegas attack meticulously planned: cops

REUTERS, Las Vegas

The Las Vegas gunman who killed 58 people and himself in the deadliest mass shooting in modern US history stockpiled weapons and ammunition over decades, and meticulously planned the attack, authorities believe.

But what led Stephen Paddock, 64, to unleash the carnage he did remains largely a mystery.

"What we know is that Stephen Paddock is a man who spent decades acquiring weapons and ammo and living a secret life, much of which will never be fully understood," Clark County Sheriff Joseph Lombardo said at a news briefing on Wednesday night. Police recovered nearly 50 firearms from three locations they searched.

Some 489 people were also injured, when Paddock strafed an outdoor concert with gunfire on Sunday night from his 32nd-floor suite of the Mandalay Bay hotel on the Las Vegas Strip. He then took his own life.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) meets with Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud at the Kremlin in Moscow, yesterday.

KILLING OF YEMENI CHILDREN UN set to blacklist Saudi-led coalition

AFP, Moscow

The United Nations has moved to put the Saudi-led coalition on its annual blacklist of child rights violators for the killing and maiming of children in Yemen, according to a draft report obtained by AFP on Wednesday.

The similar move infuriated Saudi Arabia last year, the latest draft report placed the coalition on a separate section of the list of shame, which noted that measures had been taken to improve the protection of children.

"In Yemen, the coalition's actions objectively led to the listing for the killing and maiming of children, with 683 child casualties attributed to this party, and, as a result of being responsible for 38 verified incidents, for attacks on schools and hospitals during 2016," said the draft report.

Yemen's government forces, pro-government militias, the Huthi rebels and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) were also blacklisted, the draft said.

The final report and the list, contained in an annex, will be sent to the Security Council yesterday before its public release today. The council will hold a debate on children and armed conflict on October 31.

Saudi Arabia leads an Arab military coalition that intervenes in Yemen in 2015 to support the government of President Abdenabou Mansour Hadi after Iran-backed Huthi rebels forced him into exile.

The Saudi-led coalition has killed Yemen as the world's number one humanitarian crisis, with seven million Yemenis on the brink of famine and cholera causing more than 2,000 deaths.

Saudi king in Moscow

Russia, S Arabia hail new friendship with defence, energy pacts

AFP, Moscow

Saudi Arabia's King Salman, on a landmark visit to Russia, and President Vladimir Putin yesterday signed a slew of arms and energy deals as the key US ally seeks to deepen cooperation with Moscow.

The leaders of the world's largest energy exporters discussed an extension of an OPECX agreement to cap oil output and oversee the signing of deals which officials said were worth billions of dollars.

Saudi Arabia signed preliminary agreements to buy Russia's S-400 air defence systems and anti-tank guided missile systems and receive "cutting edge technologies," said the Saudi state's military firm, Saudi Arabian Military Industries.

The two countries also signed a series of multi-billion dollar investment deals including one to create a \$1 billion fund to pursue energy projects.

"This is the first visit by a Saudi Arabian monarch in the history of our relations and that in itself is a landmark event," Putin said as he welcomed 81-year-old King Salman to Moscow in an

ornate gilded Kremlin hall. "I'm sure our visit will boost the ties between our countries," Putin added.

"We aim to strengthen our relations in the interests of peace and security, in the interests of developing the world economy," the Saudi king responded.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir told journalists that "relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia have

SAUDI-RUSSIA TIES

Riyadh says to buy Russian S-400 defence systems, other arms

Countries to set \$1b joint investment fund

space exploration (and) agroindustry and infrastructure projects."

Saudi Arabia is the country that buys the most US arms and Washington and Riyadh in May announced a \$110 billion deal to sell weapons to Saudi Arabia.

But Saudi, a long-standing ally of Washington, is keen to boost ties with Moscow as a major player in the Syrian conflict and a fellow oil producer with shared interests in supporting energy prices.

Fyodor Lukyanov, the Kremlin-connected chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, said Riyadh saw closer ties with Moscow as "diversifying for the buying, and was "expanding risks" by moving arms from both Moscow and the US.

"Saudi Arabia has recognised Russia as a significant player in a region that is important to it," he told AFP.

"They respect Russia more now. But you shouldn't think it's forever."

While Russia and Saudi Arabia are partners on the oil market, they are at loggerheads on Syria, where Moscow supports President Bashar al-Assad and Riyadh backs the opposition.

CATALONIA'S INDEPENDENCE DRIVE

Rivals dig in

Spain's court suspends Catalan parliament session; Madrid rejects mediation offer

AFP, Madrid

Spanish judges yesterday ordered Catalan lawmakers to suspend a planned session that could see the region declare independence as the national government rejected calls for mediation in a volatile standoff.

The move raised the stakes in Spain's deepest political crisis in a generation.

Violence erupted last weekend during Catalonia's independence referendum outlawed by Madrid.

Catalan regional president Carles Puigdemont lashed out at the government's "catastrophic" handling of the crisis and said he was open to mediation.

But Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's office retorted that the government "will not accept blackmail."

Rajoy himself on Thursday called on Catalan leaders to "return to legality," in an interview with the Spanish news agency EFE.

Catalan leaders have threatened to declare independence within days.

But the Constitutional Court yesterday ordered the session to be suspended while it hears an appeal by rival politicians.

It warned that any session carried out in defiance of its ban would be "null." It said the parliament's leaders could face criminal action if they ignore the court order.

Puigdemont and other Catalan leaders have said they are



Protesters with Spanish flags shout slogans during a demonstration defending a united Spain in Barcelona.

not afraid of going to jail over their independence bid.

They carried out the referendum in defiance of a ban by the Spanish court and stern warnings from the national government in Madrid.

Spain's ruling raised the question of how the national court will respond if Catalans decide to push ahead with Monday's session.

The vote on Sunday saw shocking scenes of police with batons beating unarmed voters.

The vote was not carried out according to regular electoral standards but Puigdemont said it had lent legitimacy to the independence drive.

If Catalonia declares independence, Spain could respond by suspending the region's existing autonomous status and imposing direct rule from Madrid.

Catalonia is Spain's richest region, accounting for a fifth of Spain's economy and home to thousands of domestic and foreign companies employing millions of people.

KURDS INDEPENDENCE

France offers to mediate

Iraqi PM says wants to avoid conflict

AFP, Paris

France yesterday offered to mediate in a political crisis erupting in Iraq's disputed territories and government's promise to maintain a military presence there until Islamic State was defeated.

The offer by President Emmanuel Macron coincided with a visit by Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, his first abroad since his Kurdish-held northern regions last month voted for independence.

The Iraqi government has imposed sanctions in response to the independence bid.

But al-Abadi yesterday said the Kurds understood the Kurds' independence -- provided they were expressed in "accordance with" the constitution -- and wanted to avoid violence.

"We do not want an armed confrontation, we don't want clashes," Abadi said, speaking alongside French President Francois Hollande.

The Iraqi government said it would not infringe on the federal authority, "no one can infringe on the federal authority."

The outcome of the independence bid has raised concerns that a conflict might break out there along ethnic lines, potentially weakening a US-backed campaign against Islamic State, which still holds pockets of territory in Iraq and Syria.

WAR ON IS IN IRAQ

IS loses last of bastions

AFP, Hawija

Iraqi forces retook one of the Islamic State group's last two enclaves in the country yesterday, overturning the longtime insurgent bastion of Hawija after a two-week offensive.

IS once held one-third of Iraqi territory but it has suffered loss after loss this year and now only controls a sliver of land in the Euphrates Valley near the Syrian border.

"I announce the liberation of the city of Hawija," Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi told a news conference in Paris. "All that remains is the strip on the border with Syria."

Iraqi forces celebrated after entering the town, posing with upside down IS flags and flashing V-for-victory signs after riding in on tanks and armoured personnel carriers, an AFP photographer reported.

"Today we are in Hawija and thank God it is completely liberated," said Zamer Jabbar, a member of the Shiite-dominated Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary units fighting against IS along government forces.

Hawija, 230 kilometres (140 miles) north of Baghdad, was at the centre of a pocket of mainly Sunni Arab towns that were among the final holdouts from territory seized by the jihadists in 2014.

The town had been an insurgent bastion since soon after the US-led invasion of 2003, earning it the nickname of "Kandahar in Iraq" for the ferocious resistance it put up similar to that in the Taliban militia's citadel in Afghanistan.

The area's mainly Sunni Arab population is deeply hostile both to the Shiite government in Baghdad and to the Kurds who form the historic majority in adjacent areas.

Government forces bypassed it in their advance north to second city Mosul last year, which culminated in the jihadists' defeat in the emblematic bastion in July.

Hawija lies between the two main routes north from Baghdad -- to Mosul and the city of Kirkuk, and the autonomous Kurdish region -- and its recapture is both a symbolic and a strategic victory for the government.

The US-led coalition is also backing an Arab-Kurdish alliance, the Syrian Democratic Forces, that is battling to oust IS from its de facto Syrian capital Raqqa.



Members of the Iraqi forces pose for a photograph in Hawija yesterday, after retaking the city from Islamic State (IS) group fighters.

Widodo's trouble

Indonesia's notorious traffic congestion was on display for the world yesterday after the country's president was forced to walk two kilometres through the scorching heat to attend a military parade.

AFP, Jakarta

President Joko Widodo and senior government officials had to walk more than two kilometres to attend the ceremony in Cilegon, a port city about two-and-a-half hours drive from the capital Jakarta, after being held up by gridlock.

After a 30-minute wait, "the president then decided in mid-air the car that he would walk," Widodo's guard Hil Dasiisai said in a statement.

National police chief Tito Karnavian, who was also stuck in the jam, joined the president with a phalanx of security personnel while spectators yell and chant his name.

No rift with president

Trump denies he wanted to resign; Tillerson backs his top diplomat

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson firmly denied Wednesday that he had fallen out with Donald Trump and vowed to remain in post, dismissing a report that he had once dubbed the president a "moron."

For his part, Trump declared he has "total confidence" in his top diplomat, after both had denied an explosive report that Tillerson became so frustrated over the summer that he considered resigning.

According to the NBC News story, which cited "multiple senior administration officials," he was described as "erroneous" by the State Department, Tillerson was referred to Trump as a "moron" at July 20 Pentagon meeting.

Afterwards, the report said, Tillerson met with Vice President Mike Pence, who urged him to show more respect, and with other senior officials who urged him not to resign.

Appearing before reporters at a hastily

Late UK PM Heath 'abused' five boys

Former British prime minister Edward Heath would have been questioned over claims that he sexually assaulted five boys if he was still alive, police announced yesterday.

AFP, London

Former British prime minister Edward Heath would have been questioned over claims that he sexually assaulted five boys if he was still alive, police announced yesterday.

Heath, who was Britain's premier between 1970 and 1974, is alleged to have raped an 11-year-old boy during a paid sexual encounter, officers revealed following a damning two-year investigation.

Heath, who died in 2005 aged 89, would have been interviewed in 1992, relating to five boys and two adult men.

The £1.5 million (\$2 million, 1.7 million euro) probe was triggered in 2015 after Heath was named as a suspect in an investigation into so-called historical child sex abuse.

Of the 42 allegations made against Heath, seven were sufficient to justify the police questioning him under caution.

Those allegations including the rape and indecent assault of an 11-year-old boy during a paid sexual encounter in 1961 and the indecent assault of a 10-year-old boy in 1962. In addition, he allegedly indecently assaulted two boys aged 15 in the 1960s, and one aged between 12 and 14 in the early 1990s, as well as two adult males in 1976 and between 1990 and 1992.

Six people named Heath in accusations of satanic