

French Police Press Gunman To Surrender

BY SARAH DILENKO AND
JOHANNA DECORSE
Associated Press

TOULOUSE, France — Riot police set off explosions outside an apartment building early Thursday in an effort to force the surrender of a gunman who boasted of bringing France “to its knees” with an al-Qaida-linked terror spree that killed seven people.

As the standoff dragged into a second day, hundreds of heavily armed police, some in body armor, cordoned off the five-story building in Toulouse where the 24-year-old suspect, Mohamed Merah, had been holed up.

Just after midnight, three explosions were heard and orange flashes lit up the night sky near the building. An Interior Ministry official said the suspect had gone back on a previous pledge to turn himself in — and that police blew up the shutters outside the apartment window to pressure him to surrender.

Hours later two new blasts and a burst of gunfire were heard, though officials said no full-out assault was under way. “It’s not as simple as that. We are waiting,” the Toulouse prosecutor, Michel Valet, told The Associated Press.

Authorities said the shooter, a French citizen of Algerian descent, had been to Afghanistan and Pakistan, where he claimed to have received training from al-Qaida.

They said he told negotiators he killed a rabbi and three young children at a Jewish school on Monday and three French paratroopers last week to avenge the deaths of Palestinian children and to protest the French army’s involvement in Afghanistan, as well as a government ban last year on face-covering Islamic veils.

“He has no regrets, except not having more time to kill more people and he boasts that he has brought France to its knees,” Paris Prosecutor Francois Molins told a news conference.

The standoff began when a police attempt at around 3 a.m. to detain Merah erupted into a firefight. Two police were wounded, triggering on-and-off negotiations with the suspect that lasted into the night.

As darkness fell, police cut electricity and gas to the building, then quietly closed in to wait out the suspect.

Authorities were “counting on his great fatigue and weakening,” said Didier Martinez of the SGP police union, adding the siege could



THIERRY PONS/MAXPPP/ZUMA PRESS

Police gather outside an apartment complex where Mohammed Merah, the main suspect in the killings of seven people, three of them children, in Toulouse and Montauban, has been locked in a stand-off with armed police for several hours at a flat in Toulouse, France, Wednesday. The pre-dawn raid was launched with an assault on a flat in the Croix-Daurade suburb of Toulouse which left three tactical officers injured.

go on for hours. Street lights were also cut, making Merah more visible to officers with night vision goggles in case of an assault.

French authorities — like others in Europe — have long been concerned about “lone-wolf” attacks by young, Internet-savvy militants who self-radicalize online since they are harder to find and track. Still, it was the first time a radical Islamic motive has been ascribed to killings in France in years.

Merah espoused a radical brand of Islam and had been to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region twice and to the Pakistani militant stronghold of Waziristan for training, Molins said.

He said the suspect had plans to kill another soldier, prompting the police raid.

The gunman’s brother and mother were detained early in the day. Molins said the 29-year-old brother, Abdelkader, had been implicated in a 2007 network that sent militant fighters to Iraq, but was never charged.

Wednesday’s siege was part of France’s biggest manhunt since a wave of terrorist attacks in the 1990s by Algerian extremists. The chase began after France’s worst-ever school shooting Monday and two previous attacks on paratroopers beginning March 11, killings that have horrified the country and frozen campaigning for the French presidential election next month.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who has played up nation-

alist themes in his bid for a second term, vowed to defend France.

“Terrorism will not be able to fracture our national community,” Sarkozy declared Wednesday on national television before heading to funeral services for the two paratroopers killed and another injured Thursday in Montauban, near Toulouse.

The suspect repeatedly promised to turn himself in, then halted negotiations. Cedric Delage, regional secretary for a police union, said police were prepared to storm the building if he did not surrender.

After bouts of deadly terrorist attacks in France in the 1980s and 1990s, France beefed up its legal arsenal — now seen as one of the most effective in Western Europe and a reference for countries including the U.S. after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Sarkozy’s office said President Barack Obama called him Wednesday to express condolences to the families of the victims and praise French police for tracking down the suspect. The statement said France and the United States are “more determined than ever to fight terrorist barbarity together.”

In recent years, French counterterrorism officials have focused mainly on al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, the North African affiliate of Osama bin Laden’s network that has its roots in an insurgent group in Algeria, a former French colony.

Molins said Merah’s first trip to Afghanistan ended with him being

picked up by Afghan police “who turned him over to the American army who put him on the first plane to France.”

“He had foreseen other killings, notably he foresaw another attack this morning, targeting a soldier,” Molins said, adding also planned to attack two police officers. “He claims to have always acted alone.”

Merah has a long record as a juvenile delinquent with 15 convictions, Molins added.

An Interior Ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Merah had been under surveillance for years for having “fundamentalist” Islamic views.

During the standoff, police evacuated the five-story building, escorting residents out using the roof and fire truck ladders. The suspect’s apartment was on the ground floor of the postwar building, locals said.

French authorities said Merah threw a Colt .45 handgun used in each of the three attacks out a window in exchange for a device to talk to authorities, but had more weapons like an AK-47 assault rifle. Gueant said other weapons had been found in his car.

“The main concern is to arrest him, and to arrest him in conditions by which we can present him to judicial officials,” Gueant added, explaining authorities want to “take him alive ... It is imperative for us.”

Delage said a key to tracking Merah was the powerful Yamaha motorcycle he reportedly used in all three attacks — a dark gray one that had been stolen March 6. The frame was painted white, the color witnesses saw in the school attack.

According to Delage, one of his brothers went to a motorcycle sales outfit to ask how to modify the GPS tracker, raising suspicions. The vendor then contacted police, Delage said.

The shooter has proved to be a meticulous operator. At the site of the second paratrooper killing, police found the clip for the gun used in all three attacks — but no fingerprints or DNA on it.

Those slain at the Jewish school, all of French-Israeli nationality, were buried in Israel on Wednesday as relatives sobbed inconsolably. The bodies of Rabbi Jonathan Sandler, his sons Arieh, 5, and Gabriel, 3, and 8-year-old Myriam Monsenego had been flown there earlier in the day.

Controversial Strawberry Pesticide Pulled From U.S.

BY GOSIA WOZNIAKA
Associated Press

FRESNO, Calif. — A pesticide used primarily in the strawberry industry is being pulled from the U.S. market by its Japanese manufacturer, a surprising move that comes after harsh criticism from environmentalists and farmworkers who claim the chemical is toxic and may cause cancer.

Tokyo-based Arysta Life-Science Inc. said late Tuesday that it was immediately suspending the sales, marketing and production of all formulations of the fumigant Midas, or methyl iodide, in the U.S.

The company said the decision was based on the product’s economic viability in the United States.

Since it was approved in 2007 by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, methyl iodide has seen little use across the nation. California’s \$2 billion strawberry industry, which produces more than 90 percent of the nation’s strawberries, has shunned its use, in part because it carried severe restrictions on use near schools and residential areas.

Methyl iodide had been widely seen as a replacement for another fumigant, methyl bromide, which is being phased out under international treaty because it depletes the Earth’s ozone. Some growers are currently using up their supplies of methyl bromide, while others have switched to fumigants such as chloropicrin and metam sodium as alternatives.

Methyl iodide, which is injected into soil, kills bugs, weeds and plant diseases. It was also used by some growers of tomatoes, peppers and other crops.

California regulators approved its use in December 2010 despite opposition from a wide range of scientists, environmental and farmworker groups.

Those scientists concluded that use of the fumigant would result in acute public health risks because tests on rats and rabbits have shown that exposure to the chemical causes thyroid cancer, miscarriages and damage to the nervous system. Scientists also found it can

pollute air and water.

Environmentalists and public health advocates have been pressuring Gov. Jerry Brown’s administration to reconsider state approval of the fumigant. An Alameda County Superior Court judge was expected to rule soon on a lawsuit by environmentalists who asked the state to vacate that approval.

Arysta officials said methyl iodide was applied “without a single safety incident” on 17,000 acres across the southeast — a tiny fraction of U.S. farmland — since it was first registered five years ago.

Only five applications — all under five acres — took place in California since the state registered the pesticide. That included a single strawberry farmer using the chemical on a small test site.

Arysta officials said the company will continue to maintain the federal Midas label registered with the EPA.

California Department of Pesticide Regulation spokeswoman Lea Brooks said that as of Wednesday, the chemical is no longer registered in California. The company said it will also assess whether to maintain registration with 47 other states.

Environmentalists who clamored to get the chemical off the market hailed the unexpected decision to end sales and said it came just in time for spring strawberry season.

“This is a pleasant surprise and a huge victory, especially for rural residents and farmworkers across the country,” said Paul Towers of Pesticide Action Network. “Arysta saw the writing on the wall and chose to pull their cancer-causing methyl iodide product.”

It’s unclear how the company’s decision will affect the pending lawsuit.

The strawberry industry was also surprised by the decision, said Carolyn O’Donnell, communications director for the California Strawberry Commission. Growers are concerned, O’Donnell said, about the implications of methyl iodide being pulled from shelves while methyl bromide is being phased out.

Marine Critical Of President Obama Faces Charge

SAN DIEGO (AP) — The Marine Corps on Wednesday notified a sergeant who has been openly critical of President Barack Obama that he is violating Pentagon policy barring troops from political activities and that he faces dismissal.

Camp Pendleton Marine Sgt. Gary Stein started a Facebook page called Armed Forces Tea Party to encourage fellow service members to exercise their free speech rights. He declared a few weeks ago that he would not follow the unlawful orders of the commander in chief. Stein also criticized Defense Secretary Leon Panetta for his comments on Syria.

Stein, a nine-year member of the Corps, said he did nothing wrong and planned to fight the charges. He had applied to extend his service, which was set to expire in a few months.

“I’m completely shocked that this is happening,” he said. “I’ve done nothing wrong. I’ve only stated what our oath states that I will defend the constitution and that I will not follow unlawful orders. If that’s a crime, what is America coming to?”

The Marine Corps said in a statement

Wednesday that Stein’s commanding officer ordered a preliminary inquiry on March 8 after receiving allegations that Stein posted political statements about Obama on Facebook in violation of the Pentagon’s directives.

“After reviewing the findings of the preliminary inquiry, the commander decided to address the allegations through administrative action,” the Corps said.

Stein said in addition to being discharged, he would have his rank reduced to lance corporal if he is proven to be in violation of the rules. He said he was removed from his job at the Marine Corps Recruiting Depot in San Diego on Wednesday and given a desk job with no access to computers.

According to Pentagon directives, military personnel in uniform cannot sponsor a political club; participate in any TV or radio program or group discussion that advocates for or against a political party, candidate or cause; or speak at any event promoting a political movement. Commissioned officers also may not use contemptuous words against senior of-

ficials, including the defense secretary or the president.

In January, an Army reservist wearing camouflaged fatigues got into trouble for taking the stage during a rally in Iowa with Republican presidential candidate and Texas congressman Ron Paul.

Stein was first cautioned by his superiors at Camp Pendleton, north of San Diego, in 2010, after he launched his Facebook page and criticized Obama’s health care overhaul. Stein volunteered to take down the page while he reviewed the rules at the request of his superiors.

He said he determined he was not in violation and relaunched the page. Last week, he said his superiors told him he could not use social media sites on government computers after he posted the message stating he would not follow unlawful orders of the president.

Stein said his statement was part of an on-line debate about NATO allowing U.S. troops to be tried for the Quran burnings in Afghanistan.

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