

Paris attacks: French Police hunt accomplices of terrorists who killed 127

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Paris: French police are hunting possible accomplices of eight assailants who struck Paris concert-goers, cafe diners and soccer fans in the country's deadliest peacetime attacks, a succession of blasts and shootings that cast a dark shadow over this luminous tourist destination.

Gunmen and bombers attacked seven locations around Paris on Friday, killing nearly 127 people in what a shaken President Francois Hollande described as an unprecedented terrorist attack.

Parisians who went to sleep in horror at initial news of the attacks woke on Saturday to learn that at least 180 people were also wounded, including 99 in a critical condition, in the deadliest violence to hit France since World War II.

World leaders joined together in sympathy and indignation, New York police increased security measures, and people around the world reached out to friends and loved ones in France.

The perpetrators remained a mystery - their nationalities, their motives, even their exact number. Suspicion turned to Islamic extremists, who are angry at France's military operations against the Islamic State group and al Qaeda affiliates, and who targeted satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo this year and have hit Jewish and other sites in France in the past.

French President Francois Hollande convened a special security meeting Saturday morning. He vowed to be "merciless" with the nation's foes following what he called unprecedented terrorist attacks.

Some 1,500 extra soldiers have been mobilised to guard French facilities and schools and universities are closed because of the country's deadliest attacks in decades.

Many French schools are normally open on Saturdays, but the French government ordered them shuttered as part of emergency security measures.

Soldiers were deployed at key sites around Paris, including Parliament buildings and religious sites.

The government also reimposed border controls that were abandoned as part of Europe's free-travel zone. Border and customs officers will check people, baggage and vehicles entering and leaving France by road, train, sea or plane, said customs official Melanie Lacuire.

Hollande declared a state of emergency and announced renewed border checks along frontiers that are normally open under Europe's free-travel zone.

"I determined France, a united France, a France that joins together and a France that will not allow itself to be staggered even if today, there is infinite emotion faced with this disaster, this tragedy, which is an abomination, because it is barbarism," Hollande said.

In a new development for France, seven attackers died in suicide bombings, the Paris prosecutor's office said. Another was killed by police, and prosecutor's office spokesperson Agnes Thibault-Lecuire said authorities can't rule out that other attackers are at large.

Investigators are also looking for possible accomplices who might have aided in carrying out the near-simultaneous attacks.

Three suicide bombs targeted spots around the national stadium Stade de France, north of the capital, where the French president was watching an exhibition soccer match between the French and German national teams.

Then gunshots overpowered the clinking of wine glasses in a trendy Paris neighborhood. Blood hit the pavement after gunmen targeted a string of popular cafes, crowded on the unusually balmy Friday night, and about 37 people were killed, according to Paris Prosecutor Francois Molins.

The attackers then stormed a concert hall, the Bataclan, hosting an American rock band, opened fire on the panicked audience, then took them hostage. As police closed in, three detonated explosive belts, killing themselves, according to Paris police chief Michel Cadot.

Another attacker detonated a suicide bomb on Boulevard Voltaire, near the music hall, the prosecutor's office said.

The Bataclan was the scene of the worst carnage.

Sylvain, a tall, sturdy 38-year-old concert-goer, collapsed in tears as he recounted the attack, the chaos, and his escape during a lull in gunfire.

"I was watching the concert in the pit, in the midst of the mass of the audience. First I heard explosions, and I thought it was firecrackers.

"Very soon I smelled powder, and I understood what was happening. There were shots everywhere, in waves. I lay down on the floor. I saw at least two shooters, but I heard others talk. They cried, 'It's Hollande's fault.' I heard one of the shooters shout, 'Allahu Akbar,'" Sylvain said.

He spoke on condition that his full name not be used out of concern for his safety.

He was among dozens of survivors offered counseling and blankets in a municipal building set up as a crisis centre.

Jihadis on Twitter immediately praised the attackers and criticised France's military operations against Islamic State extremists.

US President Barack Obama, speaking to reporters in Washington, decried an "attack on all humanity", calling the Paris violence an "outrageous attempt to terrorize innocent civilians."

A US official briefed by the Justice Department says intelligence officials were not aware of any threats before Friday's attacks.

The violence raises questions about security for the millions of tourists who come to Paris - and for world events the French capital routinely hosts.

Some 80 heads of state, including possibly Obama, are expected for a critical climate summit in two weeks. In June, France is to host the European soccer championship - with the Stade de France a major venue.

And Paris-based Unesco is expecting world leaders on Monday for a forum about overcoming extremism. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani cancelled a trip because of Friday's attacks. Hollande cancelled a planned trip to this

weekend's G-20 summit in Turkey.

France has been on edge since January, when Islamic extremists attacked the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, which had run cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, and a kosher grocery.

Â This time, they targeted young people enjoying a rock concert and ordinary city residents enjoying a Friday night out.

France has seen several smaller-scale attacks or attempts this year, including an incident on a high-speed train in August in which American travelers thwarted an attempted attack by a heavily armed man.

French authorities are particularly concerned about the threat from hundreds of French Islamic radicals who have travelled to Syria and returned home with skills to stage violence.

Though it was unclear who was responsible for Friday night's violence, the Islamic State is "clearly the name at the top of everyone's list", said Brian Michael Jenkins, a terrorism expert and senior adviser to the president of the Washington-based RAND Corporation.

"The big question on everyone's mind is, were these attackers, if they turn out to be connected to one of the groups in Syria, were they homegrown terrorists or were they returning fighters from having served with the Islamic State group, Jenkins said. "That will be a huge question."

- AP