

Tunisia weighs new security approach as tourists flee

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Tunis: Thousands of tourists fled from Tunisia on Saturday after the country's worst terrorist attack killed 38 people including 15 Britons as the government struggles to prevent future jihadi attacks against the all-important tourism sector.

New measures to increase the numbers of troops on the streets and crack down on organizations with radical links, however, won't bring the tourists back in the short-term, further threatening the fragile economy.

When a 24-year-old Master's student at Kairouan University strolled on to the Sousse beach and pulled out a Kalashnikov assault rifle and grenades hidden inside his beach umbrella, he was sounding the death knell for Tunisia's 2015 tourist season.

Tunisian authorities identified the attacker as Seifeddine Rezgui, saying he killed 38 people, 15 of them British, as well as German, Irish, Belgian and Portuguese victims, and sent thousands of tourists fleeing to airports. The wounded included 24 Britons, seven Tunisians, three Belgians, and a German, Russian and Ukrainian.

"It's the first time I've ever been on holiday and feared for my life," said British tourist Matthew Preece, adding it was his third time visiting Tunisia and likely his last. "So obviously you can't come back somewhere it's not safe."

Tourists and employees are returning home with tales of horror cowering in rooms or offices as the killer stalked through the hotel wearing shorts.

European countries and tour operators sent planes to evacuate their citizens. By midday Saturday, nine flights had whisked away 1,400 people, according to Mohammed Walid Ben Ghachem, manager of the Enfidha-Hammamet Airport near Sousse.

At the Imperial Marhaba Hotel itself, the guests had left, according to manager Mohammed Becheur.

"We may have zero clients today, but we will keep our staff," he said, lamenting the 75-percent occupancy rate the day before. "This summer will be hard, but we are very confident for the long term."

On the beach, there were still a few tourists from neighboring hotels. Some laid flowers at the site of the attack while police patrolling on horseback moved down the beach and security boats patrolled the waters.

Armed men on the beach may well become a more common sight in Tunisia, as Prime Minister Habib Essid announced a raft of new security measures that many have questioned why they weren't implemented after the last horrific attack against tourists in March at the National Bardo Museum that killed 22.

"It's clear that the government's security policy requires a massive revision, in the sense that most of the tourist sites weren't well-protected," Tunisian security analyst Alaya Allani said. "If the measures announced are well implemented, we could reduce but not eradicate terrorism."

Essid called up the army reserves and said there would now be armed men in the hotels and at tourists sites and he also promised to crack down on unregulated mosques that preached extremist ideas and close down organizations with shadowy funding and extremist links.

North Africa analyst Geoff Porter noted that in the short term, these measures will only drive the extremists underground and create a militarized feel to the country that might well discourage tourism.

"Tunisia's in a difficult position, you can harden a tourist site and make it more difficult to attack but the same measures would deter tourists," he said. "Tourists don't want to come and lie on a beach with guys with AK-47s."

And Tunisia needs these tourists, especially in the coastal resort areas like Sousse where it is the dominant industry. Tourism made up nearly 15 percent of gross domestic product in 2014 and it has been struggling to recover after the shocks of the Arab Spring revolution.

The attack was claimed by the radical Islamic State group, which thousands of Tunisians, disaffected with the lack of opportunity in the wake of the 2011 overthrow of secular President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, have joined.

The attack came the same day that a suicide bomber killed 27 people in a Shiite mosque in Kuwait and a man in France ran his truck into a warehouse and hung his employer's severed head on the gate.

The attack in Kuwait was also claimed by the Islamic State and on Saturday thousands of people took part in a mass funeral procession. Police said they are interrogating a number of suspects with possible links to the bombing, which was claimed by an affiliate of the Islamic State group.

Extremists have increasingly attacked soldiers and politicians in Tunisia over the past few years, but it was only with the March museum attack that it began targeting the tourism life blood of the country that will only deepen its economic crisis.

The presence of a few people still on the beaches a day after the attack does give some glimmers of hope, especially if world memory is short and people return attracted by the low prices and white sands of the beach.

"We want to see our holiday out," said Peter Phillips of Wales as he stood on the beach not far from where the attack happened.

It all may hinge, however, on whether the government can put an end to these attacks, which senior security official Rafik Chelli called an "isolated incident" that is difficult to guard against and could happen anywhere.

"If this attack doesn't do it, any subsequent attack will," Porter said. "It is hard to envision Tunisian tourism recovering from this attack and impossible to envision it recovering from a third one."

- AP