

BELGIUM 'SAFER'; RETURNING FIGHTERS A THREAT

BRUSSELS: A year after the Brussels bombings, Belgium is more secure but it faces the threat of battle-hardened jihadi fighters returning home as Islamic State makes its last stand, interior minister Jan Jambon said. "The question is whether IS will order them to fight to the last man or tell them to go home and cause as much damage as possible," Jambon said in an interview. "We have not seen any sign of a mass exodus so far but I can assure you that every intelligence service in every country is working on it," he said. Jambon said tighter security had made Belgium safer than it was when home-grown suicide bombers killed 32 people at the airport and a metro station on March 22 last year.

Belgium's federal prosecutor Frederic Van Leeuw told AFP in November that the cell that carried out the Brussels bombings, and was involved in the Paris attacks, had got its orders from high up in the IS command. The carnage in Brussels and in Paris in November 2015 involved "IS fighters carrying out attacks aimed at causing the most casualties possi-

ble," he said. However, with European jihadists finding it harder to get to and from Syria and Iraq, "the IS no longer orders but inspires people to carry out attacks," Jambon said.

That is the case for attacks perpetrated in the German capital Berlin in December, the French city of Nice in July and the southern Belgian city of Charleroi in August. A machete-wielding man shouting "Allahu akbar" (God is greatest) attacked two policewomen in Charleroi, badly injuring one in the face, before a third officer shot him dead. "I think we're in that (new) phase," said Jambon, a member of the Flemish nationalist N-VA party in a coalition government led by Prime Minister Charles Michel, a French-speaking Wallon.

Intelligence sharing

He said the intelligence services in Belgium and other countries were exchanging information to check for the possible return of jihadists as IS loses territory to regional forces backed by the US and

other powers. Numbering around 500, Belgium is the European Union's largest per capita source of so-called foreign jihadist fighters, but Jambon said none had left the country for the Middle East since January 2016. In another development that he described as "dangerous," Jambon said the lines were blurring between peaceful and violent backers of Salafist ideas exported to Belgium from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Some experts have linked the ideology embraced by IS, Al-Qaeda and other violent groups.

'Right to think'

Jambon said he believes the Saudi government when it denies it is funding the spread of Salafist ideas to Belgium. "But that does not mean there is no financing from (private) Saudis to certain groups." He said it was difficult to stop money transfers as well as curb the spread of extremist ideas in a democracy where "we have the right to think." — AFP



KADUNA, Nigeria: Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari disembarks from an aircraft upon his arrival at the Nigerian Airforce base in Kaduna yesterday. — AFP

AILING NIGERIAN PRESIDENT COMES HOME, NEEDS 'REST'

VICE-PRESIDENT OSINBAJO ACTIVE AS INTERIM LEADER

ABUJA: Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari said yesterday he would need more rest and health tests after coming home from nearly two months of medical leave in Britain during which his deputy, Yemi Osinbajo, stamped his authority on economic policy. Shortly after arriving back from London, the 74-year former general told officials he was feeling "much better" but wanted to rest over the weekend, raising questions about his ability to run Africa's biggest economy and most populous nation. Osinbajo, a lawyer who is seen as more business-friendly than Buhari, played an active role in driving policy changes in Africa's top oil producer during the president's seven-week absence.

The Nigerian stock market jumped to a one-month high when Buhari returned, but trimmed gains after his comments about his continued ill-

health raised fears of policy confusion and a power vacuum. Dressed in a dark kaftan and Muslim prayer cap, Buhari walked stiffly but unaided from his plane after it landed at an air force base in the northern city of Kaduna. After greeting a handful of provincial and military officials, he boarded a helicopter to Abuja to address Osinbajo and his top military and security commanders in a brief speech.

"I deliberately came back towards the weekend so that the Vice President will continue and I will continue to rest," Buhari said at the presidential villa. "All I need is to do further follow-ups within some weeks." He said he was "conscious" of the needs of the economy, mired in its first recession in 25 years due to a collapse in oil revenues, but failed to clarify Osinbajo's role or the extent of his powers now Buhari is back home. Buhari had

formally made him acting president when he left for treatment, but that appointment can only stand when the President is out of the country.

Buhari also did not reveal details of his sickness. "I couldn't recall when last I had a blood transfusion," he said. About his treatment in London he added: "Blood transfusions, going to the laboratories and so on and forth." Buhari has travelled to Britain several times to consult doctors since his election two years ago. Officials have refused to disclose details, saying only that he had undergone routine tests. This fuelled speculation that his health was worse than publicly admitted. In images released by his office on Thursday, Buhari looked painfully thin but was smiling as he greeted Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby in London. They were the first official pictures released in three weeks. — Reuters

AXE ATTACKER WOUNDS 9 IN GERMAN STATION RAMPAGE

DUESSELDORF: German police said yesterday an axe-wielding attacker who wounded nine people in a bloody rampage at a railway station overnight was psychologically disturbed, ruling out a terrorist motive. They were waiting to question the 36-year-old from Kosovo who is in hospital with multiple bone fractures after jumping off a bridge while trying to flee police at the crime scene, the main railway station in the western city of Duesseldorf.

News site Spiegel Online identified him as Fatmir H and said he had told investigators that he had hoped to be shot dead by police following the random attack. The suspect sparked panic when he got off a commuter train late Thursday and began swinging an axe at passers-by. Police said he was in an "exceptional mental state" at the time. Police commandos with automatic weapons, wearing bullet-proof vests and balaclavas, rushed to the station backed by police helicopters amid fears it was a terrorist attack and initial false reports of multiple attackers.

With screams echoing around the station concourse and the wounded bleeding on the ground, police chased the man along railway tracks until he leapt off a four-meter (12-foot) bridge to evade arrest. Speaking to AFP, a police spokesman said officials had ruled out an Islamist motive for the attack by the man who comes from Wuppertal, about 30 kilometers west of Duesseldorf. Germany has been on edge after a string of attacks in recent months—several carried out by people with mental health problems—and a deadly truck attack on a Berlin Christmas market in December claimed by the Islamic State group.

'Blood everywhere'

"We were on the platform waiting for the train. The train arrived and suddenly someone with an axe came out and started attacking people," an unnamed witness told Bild daily. "There was blood everywhere." Writing on Twitter, Angela Merkel's chancellery chief-of-staff Peter Altmaier said: "Our compassion and our thoughts go out to the injured." And city mayor Thomas Geisel also reached out to victims. "It's a huge blow for Duesseldorf. Many people are in shock ... My thoughts go out to the victims and their families," he said. German authorities have been on high alert, particularly since the Berlin truck attack which claimed 12 lives.

The security services say there are about 10,000 radical Islamists in the country, of whom 1,600 are suspected of having links to militant groups. But there have also been several attacks where the assailants have turned out to be psychologically unstable. Last July, a mentally disturbed 17-year-old migrant wielding an axe and a knife went on a rampage on a train in southern Germany, seriously injuring four people. And last month, a 35-year-old German national, who was reportedly suffering from psychiatric problems, drove his car into a group of pedestrians in the southwestern city of Heidelberg, killing one and injuring two. —AFP