



Iran sentences US reporter to prison

## BANGLADESH EXECUTES TWO OPPN LEADERS FOR WAR CRIMES



BRUSSELS: Belgian army soldiers and policemen patrol near Christmas stalls in the center of the capital yesterday. —AP

# BELGIUM HUNTS 'SEVERAL' SUSPECTS

## TENSE BRUSSELS REVIEWS SECURITY ALERT

BRUSSELS: A tense Belgian capital was locked down for a second day yesterday with police and troops patrolling deserted streets as authorities reviewed whether to extend a security alert meant to prevent a repeat of the bloody Paris attacks. With the world on edge over the jihadist threat, US President Barack Obama said the most powerful tool to fight the Islamic State (IS) extremist group was to say "that we're not afraid."

In Paris, Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said a chemical or biological attack "was among the risks" faced but that all possible precautions had been taken. Belgian officials were to meet late afternoon to review the security alert, imposed over fears jihadists planned similar attacks to those in Paris which left 130 people dead on Nov 13. The city's metro system and public buildings were closed, along with shops and restaurants after the terror alert was raised to the highest level of four because of what officials said Saturday was an "imminent threat."

The historic Grand Place in central Brussels, usually bustling, was virtually empty, with business badly hit in the run-up to Christmas as troops and armed police patrolled. "A group of 140 called yesterday to cancel a booking. If it continues like this, the Christmas market will be called off with all the impact that could have," said Patrick, a waiter at one of the many restaurants on the square.

**'Exceptional Measures'**  
Interior Minister Jan Jambon said the authorities were looking not just for Paris suspect Salah Abdeslam who managed to slip past French security forces after the carnage in the City of Light. "It involves several suspects and that is why we have put in place such exceptional measures," the Belga news agency cited Jambon as telling Flemish television. Justice Minister Koen Geens said in a separate Belga report he expected the metro to reopen today "if all passes off normally ... We are not

going to paralyze Brussels economically."

Belgium and the capital, home to the European Union and NATO, are no strangers to Islamist violence. Four people were shot dead at the Brussels Jewish museum last year, and in January security forces killed two suspects linked to the Charlie Hebdo killings in Paris. The UN Security Council on Friday authorised nations to "take all necessary measures" to fight jihadist violence after a wave of attacks, including the downing of a Russian aircraft in Egypt with the loss of 224 lives and the storming of a luxury hotel in Mali which left 19 dead.

**'Terrorism Knows No Borders'**

Obama said yesterday he would press ahead with a visit to Paris for UN climate talks in December, calling on world leaders to show similar resolve. "The most powerful tool we have to fight ISIL is to say that we're not afraid," he said. Russian President Vladimir Putin said the Mali attack, in which six Russians died,

showed "terrorism knows no borders" and was a global threat which must be confronted "with the broadest international cooperation."

Moscow announced separately it had killed 11 IS-linked fighters in its volatile North Caucasus region. French President Francois Hollande next week meets world leaders, including Obama and Putin, as well as Germany's Angela Merkel and Britain's David Cameron to discuss what can be done to counter the IS threat. Defence Minister Le Drian said French jets would be able to launch air strikes on IS targets from the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier in the eastern Mediterranean starting Monday.

In Turkey, police arrested a Belgian of Moroccan origin, Ahmet Dahmani, 26, who reportedly scouted targets for the Paris attacks which saw gunmen and suicide bombers hit bars, restaurants, a rock concert and the national football stadium. The suspected ringleader, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, died in a massive police raid in Paris on Wednesday along with his

cousin Hasna Aitboulahcen, reportedly a one-time party girl who turned to radical Islam about six months ago.

Abaaoud was a notorious Belgian jihadist thought to be fighting in Syria and his presence in Europe has raised troubling questions about a Europe-wide breakdown in intelligence and border security. Questions remain too over what role Salah Abdeslam - who used to run a bar with his brother Brahim in Brussels - played. Brahim died when he blew himself up outside a bar in Paris. A third brother, Mohamed Abdeslam told RTBF television yesterday he believed Salah had changed his mind at the last moment and had not gone through with his attack.

Mohamed Abdeslam said the family wanted Salah to give himself up. "That way he can give us the answers we seek, our family and the families of the victims," he said. "We would rather see Salah in prison than in the cemetery." —AFP

## TROOPS ADVANCING THANKS TO RUSSIA STRIKES: ASSAD

DAMASCUS: Syrian government troops are advancing on "nearly every front" thanks to Russian air strikes that began in September, President Bashar Al-Assad said in an interview released yesterday. The embattled president also said he favored new peace talks to be hosted in Moscow, but stressed that the Syrian conflict could not be resolved without "defeating terrorism". In the interview with Hong Kong-based Phoenix television, Assad said the situation in Syria had "improved in a very good way" since Russia began air strikes on Sept 30. "Now I can say that the army is making advancement in nearly every front... in many different directions and areas on the Syrian ground," he said, speaking in English.

Russia is coordinating its air strikes with Damascus, unlike the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group, which Assad and his government criticize as ineffectual. The army has made minimal progress on the ground, according to groups monitoring the war, though the Russian strikes have reportedly boosted morale among government troops and supporters. Moscow has also sought a leading role in a political resolution to the conflict, participating recently in high-level talks in Vienna with other world powers in a bid to create a framework for peace.

Talks there earlier this month produced a framework for the creation of a transitional government, a new constitution and elections within 18 months. But there was no agreement on the fate of Assad, whom the opposition and their backers want gone, but allies such as Iran and Russia say should be allowed to run in new elections if he wants. Assad said it was "my right" to run in new elections but it was "too early" to say if he intended to. "(It) depends on how my feeling is regarding the Syrian people. I mean, do they want me or not? You cannot talk about something that's going to happen maybe in the next few years," he said. Assad said he backed Moscow's efforts to organize new dialogue between the regime and opposition in a "Moscow 3" conference, but insisted a political solution could only be achieved with the defeat of "terrorism". "We need to make the dialogue, but the concrete steps should follow at least a major defeat of the terrorists and the government takes control of a major area that has been captured by the terrorists," he said.

The Syrian leader said it would take "maximum of two years" to produce a new constitution and hold a referendum on it. Assad's government considers all those who oppose his regime "terrorists," and has framed the conflict that began with anti-government demonstrations in March 2011 as a "war on terror". —AFP

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