

## POSSIBLE SYRIA TERROR LINK TO PARIS ARRESTS

**PARIS:** French police investigating a suspected bomb factory near Paris believe three arrested men were preparing attacks and had made calls to Syria, a minister said yesterday. Ingredients to make an explosive known as TATP, commonly used by the Islamic State group (IS), were discovered in an unoccupied apartment in the Parisian suburb of Villejuif on Wednesday, as well as gas canisters and electrical wiring.

More potential TATP ingredients were found Thursday during a search of an enclosed parking space belonging to the main suspect, the flat's owner, a source close to the case said. Anti-terror police launched raids following a tip-off from a worker at the building who has been praised for his "citizen's reflex" for reporting suspicious activity. The Paris daily *Le Parisien* reported that the workman was a plumber

working to fix a recurrent leak. He was outside the building when he spotted chemicals on a balcony of the flat, then saw a soldering iron and a hot plate through the window, the paper reported, quoting a source close to the probe.

### Links to Spain cell?

Interior Minister Gerard Collomb said the men in custody-two were arrested on Wednesday and a third overnight-"were involved in terrorism". "We've seen that there were calls exchanged" with someone in the war zone in Syria, Collomb said on Franceinfo radio.

The men have denied they were preparing attacks, claiming they were planning a string of robberies in which the explosives would be used to blow up bank cash machines, Collomb said.

The arrests raised questions about whether the suspects might be linked to a jihadist cell in Spain which carried out two vehicle attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils last month. Some of the extremists behind the violence in Spain-mostly Moroccan nationals who were also preparing bombs made with TATP-visited Paris on August 11 and 12, about a week before their deadly rampage. "It is possible there were links but honestly I don't know," Collomb said.

The Spain attackers stayed in a hotel in the Parisian suburb of Malakoff a short drive from where the suspected bomb factory was discovered on Wednesday in Villejuif. After buying a camera and leaving their hotel, Collomb said the Spain jihadists "spent a long time in front of the Eiffel Tower... We have it all from their phone data". — AFP



**JOHANNESBURG:** South African chef Nthabiseng Mabuza (pseudonym), 35 years old, shows pictures of her injuries, at home on July 7, 2017, in Vosloorus, a middle-class township east of Johannesburg, after telling about her rape by the driver of a public mini-bus taxi, while she was on her way to work, two years ago. — AFP

## SOUTH AFRICAN RAPE VICTIMS STRUGGLE AGAINST POLICING

### VICTIMS LIVE IN FEAR, RAPISTS RUN FREE

**VOSLOORUS:** South African chef Nthabiseng Mabuza, 35, was on her way to work and the only passenger in a public mini-bus taxi when she was raped by the driver. Her alleged attacker was arrested at the scene after she shouted for help to a passerby who flagged down a police patrol car. Although the suspect was held in custody for several months, he was later freed on bail.

Two years on, the case has not yet come to court and the accused has vanished. Mabuza, a pseudonym as she did not want to be identified by her real name, is dumbfounded and angry at the police for releasing the alleged rapist and says she lives in fear that he is roaming the streets. Her case is one example of the struggles that rape victims face and how they are treated by the police in South Africa, where tens of thousands of people are sexually assaulted each year.

"The day when I was supposed to testify, he (the alleged rapist) was nowhere to be found," Mabuza told AFP, recounting the day last year when she went to court hoping the trial would finally start after being repeatedly postponed. "Since then, nothing has happened," she said, flanked by her husband, 45, at their home in Vosloorus, a middle-class township east of Johannesburg.

Her efforts to find out what was going on from the investigating officer proved futile, despite what she believes is overwhelming evidence of the brutal pre-dawn attack not far from Vosloorus. Police Minister Fikile Mbalula has vowed to over-

haul the system after admitting there is something "wrong in the administration of justice at our police stations."

"We need to respond to the outcries of millions of our people that our police force does not respond adequately (to rape cases)," the minister told AFP in an interview. He said his department would now do "what we are supposed to do so our police stations are functional and they do everything at their disposal to assist victims of abuse".

### Blaming the victim

Mabuza's husband flips through photographs showing images of his wife, the bloodied mini-bus in which she was raped, her earring ripped off during the assault and a piece of synthetic hair extension lying in the grass. "This happened in 2015, now it is 2017, the guy was apprehended on the same day," he said, letting out an exasperated sigh. The couple is bewildered at how an alleged rapist could have been freed on bail. South African police are accused by NGOs, women's and human rights groups, academics, the media and some lawmakers of being insensitive to victims and slow in their investigations. Conviction rates from the reported cases are low at under 10 percent, according to several independent studies. A soon-to-be-published report, of which AFP was given an advance copy, entitled *Rape Justice in South Africa*, studied data from 2012 and found only 8.6 percent of cases that went to trial ended in a guilty verdict. — AFP

## PM MAY'S BREXIT BATTLE RETURNS TO PARLIAMENT

**LONDON:** British lawmakers began debating yesterday a landmark bill to end Britain's membership of the European Union, with Prime Minister Theresa May gearing up for a major battle. The bill provides for the repeal on Brexit day of the 1972 European Communities Act that conferred Britain's membership, and also converts estimated 12,000 existing European regulations into British law.

Ministers say it is the first step in implementing last year's referendum vote for Brexit, and will provide legal continuity to ensure no "cliff-edge" when Britain leaves the bloc in March 2019. But critics warn it represents an unprecedented "power-grab" by giving the government broad powers to amend the EU laws as they are transferred without proper parliamentary scrutiny. A House of Lords committee said it "weaves a tapestry of delegated powers that are breath-taking in terms of both their scope and potency", and the opposition Labour party has vowed to vote against it.

May's Conservative party lost its majority in the House of Commons in a snap election in June, but her alliance with Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party means the first stage of the bill should pass. However, she is vulnerable to rebellions on her own side as the legislation comes under detailed scrutiny in the coming weeks, while at least seven more Brexit-related bills are expected before Britain leaves the EU.

Cabinet divisions over one of the most contentious issues of Brexit, immigration, emerged this week following the publication of a leaked report proposing restrictions on EU workers once Britain ends free movement of labor. Interior minister Amber Rudd was said by several newspapers to be unhappy with the plans, which have been condemned by several business groups as too tough. Meanwhile in Brussels, negotiations with the EU on the terms of the divorce are progressing slowly, threatening Britain's hopes to move on to talks on a future trade relationship within weeks.

### 'Power-grab'

May said yesterday that the Repeal bill was "the single most important step we can take to prevent a cliff-edge for people and businesses, because it provides legal certainty" after Brexit. Officials estimate that around 800 to 1,000 amendments will be needed to the EU laws being transferred—a task too large to involve full parliamentary scrutiny in each case, which is why they want to use the special powers.

The powers would expire two years after Brexit and cannot be used to raise taxes or amend human rights law—but they could be used to implement parts of the final Brexit deal agreed with Brussels. Labour has said it would seek to defeat the bill when, after two days of debate, it goes to its first vote in the House of Commons on Monday. "If this is passed in its current form, MPs are effectively relegating themselves to spectators as the baton is passed to the government to do as it likes with Brexit," Brexit spokesman Keir Starmer told BBC radio. The Scottish National Party (SNP) and the smaller Liberal Democrats party, which are both pro-European, are also likely to vote against the bill. With the DUP's support, the government has a working majority of 13 MPs in the House of Commons and the first stage of the Repeal Bill should pass. But Conservative MPs are likely to join opposition parties in trying to amend the legislation when it moves to the next stage of debate later this autumn. The devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales could also seek to hinder the progress of the bill. — AFP