

International

Bomb suspect, 2 Hamas officers killed in a raid

Bomb plot targets Palestinian prime minister

NUSEIRAT: The main suspect in a recent bomb attack against the Palestinian prime minister in the Gaza Strip was killed in an arrest raid yesterday that also left two members of the Hamas security forces dead. One of the suspect's alleged accomplices was also killed in the raid after Hamas, the Islamist movement that runs the Gaza Strip, launched a manhunt. The interior ministry in the Gaza Strip announced the deaths. The two suspects were earlier said to have been arrested, but the ministry issued a statement later saying they had died from their wounds.

A third suspect was under arrest. The members of the security forces were named as Hammad Abu Swerah and Ziad al-Howajri, with the interior ministry saying they "died while carrying out their national duty in a security operation this morning." A clash with an exchange of fire had erupted earlier in the day in Nuseirat, south of Gaza City, a day after Hamas named Anas Abu Koussa, born in 1993, as the lead suspect. Dozens of new checkpoints had been erected throughout the Palestinian enclave and armed security forces were searching cars, an AFP correspondent said.

Palestinian prime minister Rami Hamdallah was unhurt by the roadside bomb that struck his

convoy on March 13, in what Palestinian officials have called an assassination attempt as he entered Gaza on a rare visit. Palestinian Authority intelligence chief Majid Faraj, who was accompanying Hamdallah, also escaped injury. The roadside bomb, believed to have weighed around 15 kilograms, exploded a few hundred meters (yards) from the border with Israel, shortly after Hamdallah's convoy entered the territory. A second bomb failed to explode, officials said.

Failed reconciliation

Hamas did not give a possible motive for the attack on Hamdallah, head of government in president Mahmud Abbas's Palestinian Authority. On Wednesday, a Hamas security source

said investigators had arrested and were questioning three people, including two members of the PA-run intelligence services. Another security source said he believed radical Salafist Muslims had planted the bomb, which lightly wounded six people.

On Monday, Abbas accused Hamas of being behind the blast and said he would take new measures in response, without specifying details. Abbas has previously taken a series of measures, including reducing electricity pay-

ments for Gaza's two million residents, in what analysts said was an attempt to punish Hamas. Hamas and the West Bank-based PA have been bitter rivals for a decade since the Islamists seized control of Gaza. The bombing appears to have brought to an end hopes for an already floundering reconciliation deal signed in October between Hamas and Abbas's Fatah party, which dominates the PA.

While Hamas did hand over control of Gaza's borders to the PA, it maintains full control of the rest of the territory, with its police force and armed wing still operating throughout. The future of that armed wing has proved one of the largest sticking points in implementing the reconciliation agreement. Previous attempts at reconciliation have failed. Hamas has fought three wars with Israel since 2008 and is blacklisted as a terrorist organization by the European Union and the United States. Many hoped reconciliation could ease worsening humanitarian conditions in the Palestinian enclave, which suffers from electricity shortages and a lack of infrastructure, including clean water.—AFP

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Erdogan ally to buy top Turkey media group

ISTANBUL: A top Turkish businessman with close ties to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is to buy Turkey's largest media holding, a statement said yesterday, raising fears of a new tightening of government control on the press. Dogan Holding said in a statement that talks had begun on the sale of Dogan Media Group to the Demiroren Group of magnate Erdogan Demiroren for around \$1 billion (810 million euros).

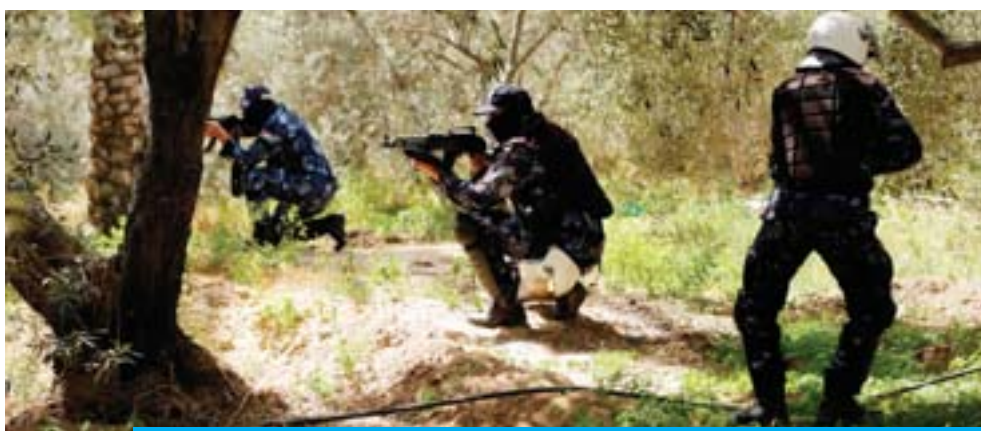
Dogan Media Group comprises some of Turkey's most prestigious media names including the Hurriyet daily newspaper, the Fanatik sports daily, the CNN-Turk rolling news service and the Kanal-D channel. The respected CNN-Turk and Hurriyet had been regarded as holding a relatively independent editorial line in recent years, as the space for voices critical of Erdogan shrunk. However, the Demiroren Holding, which has interests in energy, property and construction, is seen as more friendly to Erdogan.

The takeover plan, first reported by the T24 website on Wednesday, raised fears among journalists there would be little space left to chal-

enge the president ahead of 2019 elections. A senior Dogan Media Group journalist expressed alarm over the move, adding it was part of a trend in Turkey to centralise media control. "It is an indication of a lack of pluralism, zero tolerance to dissent, and a rock bottom for freedom of expression in Turkey," the staffer, who asked not be named, told AFP. "With this acquisition, around 90 percent of Turkish media is now largely under government control."

Prominent Turkish journalist Kadri Gursel, himself released from jail late last year, wrote on Twitter that media in Turkey was "under the direct political control of President Erdogan". Others questioned how the Demiroren group would be able to raise the funds for such a purchase. "Demiroren does not have this money. But it could be an operation by the (presidential) palace," said economist Mustafa Sonmez. According to the latest rating of the Turkish edition of Forbes magazine, Erdogan Demiroren is Turkey's 45th richest person with a total fortune of \$850 million. The Dogan Media Group is valued at \$1.1 billion, although this is reduced to \$890 million when debts are considered, according to the company statement.

Demiroren already bought the Milliyet and Vatan newspapers in 2011 from Dogan Holding, with the formerly mainstream outlets toeing the government line since then. His son, Yildirim, also holds a powerful role as head of the Turkish Football Federation.—AFP



PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES: Hamas policemen take a position in Nuseirat, south of Gaza City yesterday, during clashes as they carried out a man-hunt that resulted in the arrest of a suspect in a recent bomb attack against the Palestinian prime minister.—AFP

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EU leaders blast Turkey's actions in Mediterranean

BRUSSELS: European leaders have strongly condemned Turkey's "illegal actions" toward Greece and Cyprus in a blistering denunciation that could upend an EU-Turkish summit in Bulgaria next week. The statement by the 28 European Union member states meeting in Brussels comes after Turkey's arrest of two Greek soldiers, and its promise to prevent the internationally-recognized Greek Cypriot government from exploring for oil and gas.

"The European Council strongly condemns Turkey's continued illegal actions in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea and underlines its full solidarity with Cyprus and Greece," the draft conclusions said. The draft "calls on Turkey to cease these actions and re-

spect the sovereign rights of Cyprus to explore and exploit its natural resources in accordance with EU and international law." The statement shows firm support for Greece and Cyprus—which have so far been among the EU countries most reluctant to endorse a separate EU summit condemnation of a nerve agent attack on a former Russian agent on English soil.

The draft urged Turkey to normalize relations with Cyprus, divided since 1974 when Turkish troops invaded and occupied the northern third of the island in response to a Greek military junta-sponsored coup. A stand-off over exploiting energy resources in the region risks further complicating stalled efforts to reunify Cyprus after UN-backed talks collapsed last year. In recent weeks Turkish warships blocked an Italian drillship from exploring for gas in the east Mediterranean island's waters. The leaders also expressed "grave concern over the continued detention of EU citizens in Turkey" and called for these issues to be resolved through dialogue with the EU member states.

Two Greek soldiers were arrested on March 2 for entering a military zone in the northern Turkish province of Edirne and are waiting for their case to be heard.—AFP