European-wide police raids in run-up to World Cup

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Following months of surveillance, a series of police raids across five European countries has led to the arrest of 93 people. The French Interior Ministry said the operation was aimed at dismantling "a network of dissident extremists" from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which is conducting an armed struggle against the present government of Algeria and seeking to install a strict Muslim regime.

The largest number of arrests was in France, where 49 people were detained. Raids took place simultaneously in Belgium, where 10 were arrested, Italy, where 24 were held, Germany and Switzerland. These mass arrests occur just two weeks before the start of the World Cup, which France is hosting.

On Wednesday, French Interior Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènment announced that the security plan "Vigipirate" was being stepped up. Over 1,800 armed police have been detailed to watch railway stations, airports and harbours. He said the state had prepared a "whole series of measures", but refused to go into any detail.

Those arrested in the police sweep are purported to be members of one faction of the GIA loyal to Hassan Hattab, described by Associated Press as "a dissident GIA leader who reportedly wants to bring the Algerian conflict back to Europe." The French Interior Minister, by way of justifying the police sweep, told the press, "There were sufficient indications for us to believe that actions may be perpetrated during the World Cup."

No evidence has so far been presented to back up the charges of planned "actions," nor has any characterisation of the coming attacks been presented. No precise charges have as yet been placed against those jailed in the roundup.

Police searched many buildings and homes and took away video tapes, documents and computer equipment. However, only one firearm and no explosives were found. Attempts to justify the arrests have revealed the extent of surveillance carried out by the police, with telephone calls between several countries being monitored.

These raids reveal the degree of co-ordination that now exists between the police and security forces of the various European countries. The World Cup has become a testing ground for the type of joint security operations that have been discussed in parallel with the establishing of a Single European Market with an attendant relaxation of border controls.

Operations such as the police roundup of alleged GIA members highlight the growing threat to basic democratic rights. The measures used against the GIA today can be extended tomorrow to all those whom the ruling powers of Europe perceive to be politically dangerous.

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