

Grenade attack on Belgian city square leaves six dead, 123 wounded

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Six people were killed and 123 wounded yesterday, after an attacker opened fire with an assault rifle and threw three grenades at a crowded bus station on St. Lambert square in Liège, Belgium.

Accounts of this tragic event remain highly confused, with the numbers of people reported dead or wounded rising rapidly throughout the day. There have been contradictory accounts of what had in fact taken place.

Initial reports of the attack spoke of three gunmen at the scene. Liège city employee Micheline Dupont told BFM-TV that three gunmen, armed with Kalashnikov rifles, had opened fire in an operation aiming to free a detainee at the nearby Liège courthouse.

In the afternoon, however, state and police officials insisted that there was only one attacker, who acted alone. This gunman—identified by police as Nordine Amrani, a Liège resident aged 33 and of Moroccan origin—died at the scene of the attack.

Eyewitness accounts of Amrani's death conflicted: some said he was killed by a grenade blast, and others that he shot himself in the head. Liège prosecutor Danièle Reynders declined to identify the cause of Amrani's death: "The inquiry will determine whether it was a voluntary gesture on his part, or whether the equipment he had with him provoked his death."

Those killed on St. Lambert square included two high school students, Pierre Gerouville and Medhi Nathan Belhadj, aged 15 and 17; a 75-year-old woman; a 20-year old man; and a 23-month-old baby, as well as Amrani himself.

As of last night, at least four of the wounded were reportedly in critical condition.

Yesterday evening authorities ruled out terrorism as a motive, with Interior Minister Joëlle Milquet declaring: "No information at our disposal confirms any link with terrorism."

Belgian Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo said, "Words cannot express this tragedy. Shock in the population is entirely comprehensible, but I insist: this is an isolated act."

Official accounts of the attack raise at least as many questions as they answer. They make no attempt to reconcile their claims with earlier accounts of an attack by multiple gunmen involving the Liège courthouse, or to explain how Brussels knew the event had no link to terrorism.

Police authorities told reporters that Amrani had a criminal record but had not been involved in any violent crime. According to Reynders, Amrani was a Liège resident who was "well known to the police forces," and yesterday had been scheduled "to report for questioning to a police service." Reynders did not say what type of appointment Amrani had with police, though press reports later suggested it was for questioning on a sexual abuse case.

The Belgian daily *La Meuse* described Amrani as a "weapons specialist, capable of disassembling, repairing, and assembling numerous weapons."

He was sentenced to 58 months in prison without parole in September 2008 after a police search of his home found 10 firearms, including high-powered rifles, 9,500 spare parts for various weapons, and 2,800 cannabis plants. At his trial, Amrani refused to disclose the origin or destination of these weapons.

Nonetheless, Amrani was released from prison last year, without serving his full sentence.

Yesterday, according to official accounts, Amrani did not report to the police as requested, but just after midday took up position on the roof of a bakery near St. Lambert square and in front of the city's courthouse. From this vantage point he hurled grenades into crowds of Christmas shoppers, students, and children and

opened fire on bystanders with a rifle and pistol.

Central Liège was put under police lockdown after the attack, with shops closed and municipal buses ordered out of the city centre until mid-afternoon.

A bomb squad also went to examine the area. It received orders to blow up Amrani's vehicle, which was parked near St. Lambert square.

The police's Anti-Organized Crime Squad also investigated the area, amid reports that one of the gunmen had fled and hid in a courthouse annex.



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