

Northern Marseille on lock-down after shots fired at police

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French police sealed off a housing estate in Marseille on Monday after hooded gunmen opened fire on a police car with Kalashnikov rifles, in what a senior local official suggested was an incident related to drug crime. Gunfire had been heard at around 10 a.m. in the Castellane area of the French port city.

According to initial reports, there were no victims or property damage. However, special police units were rapidly deployed following the incident on the north side of the city.

Residents of La Castellane neighborhood, home to some 7,000, were ordered to stay indoors. A day care center was evacuated as troops from the GIPN special forces unit were sent into the sealed-off estate, a police source said.

DNA samples were also taken from residents in the area “in order to arrest the people” behind the shooting, according to Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve. Kalashnikovs and “several” kilos of drugs were found during police searches of La Castellane, according to Cazeneuve.

The shooting occurred just as Prime Minister Manuel Valls arrived for a scheduled visit to tout statistics showing a fall in crime in the city.

According to the first eyewitness reports, men dressed in fatigues and with Kalashnikovs broke into the Marseille city at around 10:15. Residents alerted the police, claiming that “five to ten individuals” were firing guns into the air in this neighborhood, where a 25-year-old man was killed by a bullet in the head last month.

Subsequently, however, police claimed that they had come under fire. Pierre-Marie Bourniquel, Marseille’s director of public safety, was checking that the area was safe before Valls’s visit in the afternoon as the firing began. Bourniquel said that he and other officers were

in three vehicles that were targeted. He said the shots missed the vehicles by about three metres.

“We were shot at when we got there. We were clearly marked police cars,” he said.

“There has been shooting from people wearing masks and armed with Kalashnikovs in the direction of a police vehicle,” Bourniquel declared.

Samia Ghali, a Socialist Party (PS) senator from the region, told *i-Télé* that she spoke with the police director and was told that the gunmen were targeting police and also firing at random. Ghali said the incident was a symptom of broader troubles such as drugs, prostitution, and trafficking in poor, crime-ridden areas such as La Castellane.

A key Mediterranean port that is also France’s second-largest city, Marseille suffers from high rates of poverty and reportedly has the largest Arab immigrant population of any French city. French governments of all political colors have treated the city above all as a law-and-order problem; Ghali herself has called for the deployment of the French military to police various areas of the city.

The French army has not been deployed to maintain order in cities inside French territory since it was used during the bloody 1954-1962 war in Algeria, in a failed attempt to crush opposition to French colonial rule in Algiers and beyond.

At his press conference at regional police headquarters in Marseille, which was also attended by Cazeneuve, Valls called the firing of Kalashnikovs “unacceptable.”

Valls praised the police lockdown at La Castellane as a proof of the rapid build-up of police powers carried out by his PS government. “Only a short time ago, we would not have been able to come so quickly, seal off the area, protect schools and inhabitants, and seize

several deadly weapons, ” he declared.



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