Twelve killed, dozens injured as truck crashes into Berlin Christmas market

Our reporter
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Police report that twelve people were killed and 48 injured Monday evening when a truck crushed into a Christmas market at Breitscheidtplatz near the famous Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin.

As of this writing, it was still unclear if the event was an accident or a deliberate attack. Shortly before midnight, the police and fire departments announced that they would not issue any further statements. A press conference has been scheduled for Tuesday afternoon, where Berlin Mayor Michael Müller and Berlin State Interior Minister Andreas Geisel are expected to speak.

Police initially spoke of a terrorist attack, but later declared that the circumstances were still unclear and asked people "not to spread rumors." One officer said, "We don't have clear evidence pointing in one or the other direction."

"I don't want to use the term 'attack' yet, though there are many indications pointing to it," German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière told the broadcaster ARD.

A witness to the horrific event, Shandana Durrani, told CNN she was leaving the area when the truck hit the market. "I think everybody thought there was a terrorist attack happening. People dropped what they were carrying and ran for cover… It seemed like the truck just jumped the curb and took a wrong turn and barreled through the crowd." She said the lorry passed about 20 feet from her and destroyed three stalls at the popular market.

Heavily armed police sealed off the area and asked locals to stay away and to avoid posting videos of the incident online. They arrested one suspect, although it remained unclear if he was the driver. A second person, alternately described as the "co-driver" of the truck and a passenger, was found dead at the scene. Press reports say he was a Polish national.

Several media outlets in Germany reported that the driver of the truck was a refugee who had come to Germany from Pakistan or Afghanistan this past February. This had not been reported or confirmed by the police or other authorities, which had not released the name of the man in custody.

The lorry was reportedly registered to a company located near the Polish city of Szczecin and was on its way back from Italy. The Polish owner of the vehicle, Ariel Zurawski, confirmed to AFP that his driver was missing. "We haven't heard from him since this afternoon," Zurawski said. "We don't know what happened to him. He's my cousin. I've known him since I was a kid. I can vouch for him."

Reuters reported that Zurawski fears the truck may have been hijacked. He said he last spoke with his cousin, the driver, at about noon on Monday. The driver told Zurawski that he was in Berlin and planned to offload the truck on Tuesday morning. "They must have done something to my driver," the owner told TVN24.

The federal prosecutor of Germany has taken over the case.

Despite the dearth of information about the incident, governments internationally where quick to call it a "terrorist attack" and use it to justify their policies of state repression, anti-immigrant measures and militarism.

In a statement, the White House condemned "what appears to have been a terrorist attack" and noted that the US government had been in contact with German officials. "Germany is one of our closest partners and strongest allies, and we stand together with Berlin in the fight against all those who target our way of life and threaten our societies," the White House declared.

US President-elect Donald Trump was even more bellicose, declaring: "Innocent civilians were murdered in the streets as they prepared to celebrate the Christmas holiday… ISIS and other Islamist terrorists continually slaughter Christians in their communities and places of worship as part of their global jihad."

Trump pledged to "eradicate" these "terrorists and their regional and worldwide networks … from the face of the earth" and to "carry out this mission with all freedom-loving partners."

The Socialist Party government in France, which had just prolonged the state of emergency introduced after the November 2015 terror attacks in Paris, announced that it was stepping up its police presence. Interior Minister Bruno Le Roux called on security forces to "immediately reinforce" their presence at Christmas markets throughout the country and maintain "maximum vigilance."

In Germany, the interior minister of the state of Hesse, Peter Beuth, said, "As a reaction, we will beef up our police presence once again."

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