

Manhunt continues for Belgian neo-Nazi officer who planned to kill virologists

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A manhunt is continuing in Belgium for a military officer and right-wing extremist, Jürgen Conings, who has announced plans to assassinate representatives of the government and coronavirus virologists.

Conings, 46, disappeared on Monday, leaving behind two notes, one to his girlfriend and the other to the police. In the letters, he reportedly announced he was “entering the resistance” and would live out his “final days” as he intended. His girlfriend has publicly appealed for him to turn himself in.

The manhunt has been concentrated on the region of Limbourg, not far from the border with the Netherlands. Conings is presumed to be heavily armed and reputed to be an expert marksman. Until only a few days ago, he used his position as a military instructor with access to the arms cache in the army to prepare an arsenal. The federal prosecutors announced that inside Coning’s abandoned SUV, they discovered anti-tank rocket launchers and firearm munitions. He is “probably still in possession of lighter armaments,” they stated.

On Friday, Belgian Minister of Justice Vincent Van Quickenborne announced that on the evening of his disappearance Monday, Conings had spent “more than two hours in the area around the home of a target” but refused to specify who the target was. The Flemish-language television station VRT reported that it was likely the home of Marc Van Ranst, a leading health spokesman for the Belgian government and target of extreme-right groups denouncing coronavirus lockdowns and claiming that the coronavirus is itself a conspiracy.

Up until Friday, the manhunt had been concentrated on the dense forest region of the national park of Haute Campine. A portion of the E314 freeway, which borders the national park, was also shut down. To

search the region of more than 12,000 hectares of forest and land, more than 400 officers were deployed, including 250 police, 150 military personnel, and representatives from Germany and the Netherlands.

On Friday the government announced that the manhunt in the national park would be ended. Charges were brought against Conings of “attempted terrorist assassination” and “possession of arms in a terrorist context.”

It remains unclear who are Conings’ potential targets. Mosques surrounding the Haute Campine park are reportedly under heightened surveillance, and a number of mosques in the neighbouring municipalities of Maasmechelen have already closed their doors as a precaution, according to *Het Nieuwsblad*. The family of virologist Von Ranst has reportedly been taken under police protection since Monday. Conings also reportedly threatened to kill members of the government.

Conings’ letters make clear he is animated by the fascistic campaign denouncing any coronavirus social distancing measures. “I cannot continue to live with the lies of people who decide how we live,” he writes. “The political elite and now virologists decide how you and me will live. They sow hatred and frustration...”

He makes clear that he is not acting on an impulse and has prepared his attack long in advance. “I know I will become an enemy of the state. They will search for me and find me at a certain point. I am ready for that. Little by little, everything has been put in place and I’ve prepared myself.”

There are many unanswered questions that are raised by Conings’ terrorist plot.

First of all, it has now been reported that he was being monitored extremely closely by intelligence agencies as both a member of the army with extreme-

right sympathies and also as a potential terrorist attacker. Yet there has been no explanation as to how such an individual was kept in a senior position as a military training officer in the Belgian army and was apparently given access to the armory.

France Info, citing unnamed Belgian government sources, reported that Conings was one of “around 30” members of the Belgian army currently under surveillance for harboring “sympathies” with the far right.

For the same reason, OCAM, the Belgian intelligence agency for analysis of terrorist threats, had placed him on its file for the past three months as a potential threat, according to the Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo.

The minister of defense, Ludivine Dedonder, admitted to the Belgian parliament that Conings had received an official sanction from the military hierarchy in 2020 after having made “racist comments” and “threats” on Facebook. An army major general had laid formal charges against him, which were subsequently dropped, according to Dedonder.

The government has attempted to explain the subsequent failure to take measures against Conings as simply a breakdown in security. Accordingly, De Croo called for a tightening of security protocols in the army for individuals with extremist views.

Yet this explains very little. Not only was Conings not removed from the army, he was kept in the position of a military instructor for recruits. Moreover, it has still not been explained how he was able to use his position to obtain vast quantities of arms. The official explanation that Conings was acting alone, without detection by other army personnel, is highly tenuous. It would mean that the protocols for monitoring the stockpile of arms were essentially nonexistent.

An alternative, and more plausible, explanation is that Conings was acting, at least at some point, as part of a far-right network within the army.

This would also conform with what has already been confirmed about the existence of such networks in other Western European countries, particularly Germany, as well as France and Spain.

In Germany, there are well-documented neo-Nazi networks inside the Bundeswehr, the special forces, and the state apparatus. There have been numerous reports of the preparations by terrorist cells drawing up kill

lists of left-wing political opponents to be assassinated for a supposed “Day X” and stockpiling weapons and supplies for a protracted civil war.

In 2018, for example, a German news magazine’s investigation explained: “Numerous interrogations paint the picture of a conspiratorial troop that is supposed not to shy from the deliberate killing of political opponents. According to the investigators, the elite fighters had also set up secret caches of weapons, ammunition, fuel and food—on the German border with Austria and Switzerland.”

In France, a far-right network among retired army generals and officers published an open letter in the neofascist magazine *Valeurs Actuelles* announcing their support for a military putsch to put down the growing threat of Islam in France and a potential civil war in which “the deaths will number in the thousands.” A subsequent letter published this month and reportedly signed by up to 2,000 active-duty soldiers supported the generals’ letter.

In Spain, retired army generals have denounced the strikes by workers in March 2020 to demand the shutting down of production amid the coronavirus pandemic. They declared that it may be necessary to massacre up to half of the Spanish population.

Conings’ documented ties with the neo-Nazi networks in Belgium have already begun to be revealed. This weekend it was reported that Belgian police had searched numerous houses of known members of far-right groups as part of their search for Conings.

This includes Tomas Boutens, the former leader of the Flemish fascist “Blood, Bodem, Eer en Trouw” (“Blood and Soil, Honor is Loyalty”) movement. He was condemned to five years in prison in 2014, with a one-year suspended sentence.



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