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19 killed in Tunisia attack; hostage drama ends with deaths of gunmen

Assailants stormed National Bardo Museum; operation to track possible accomplices ongoing

March 18, 2015

Gunmen disguised as soldiers opened fire at a museum in Tunis, the Tunisian capital, on Wednesday, killing 19 people and sparking a hostage drama that ended with security forces storming the building, leaving two assailants and a police officer dead.

The victims include 17 tourists from Italy, Germany, Poland and Spain, Prime Minister Habib Essid told reporters after the museum raid concluded, though he said that figure was not final. Another 22 people were injured.

Essid said a separate security operation was underway to track down "two or three" possible accomplices.

The attack began with a burst of gunfire outside the National Bardo Museum, which is next to the capital's parliament compound. The gunmen then took a number of tourists and museum staffers hostage as government forces surrounded the area. Parliament was evacuated.

Television footage showed dozens of people, including elderly foreigners and one man carrying a child, running for shelter in the compound, covered by security forces that began to storm the museum.

Both attackers were killed in the raid, after which Tunisian authorities declared the hostage crisis over.

Yasmine Ryan, an independent journalist who covers North Africa, told Al Jazeera from Tunis that ambulances were going in and out of the area, which was cordoned off by security forces.

The identities of the gunmen remain unknown. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack. However, Essid said the attack was meant to target the Tunisian economy and specifically its tourism sector, which has just begun to rebound after several years of uprising and instability.

"We are being envied by many for outstanding [progress] in terms of our political transition and our march toward democracy," he said. "We are all required to join hands in our fight against terrorism."

In a post to its Facebook page, Tunisia's major Islamist political party, Ennahdha, said it was "horrified by this attack," adding that it "strongly condemns all acts of violence against Tunisia and its visitors."

European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said "terrorist organizations" were behind the attack. "The EU is determined to mobilize all the tools it has to fully support Tunisia in the fight against terrorism," she added.

Tunisia has witnessed periodic flare-ups of violence since the country's 2011 uprising toppled autocrat Zein El Abidin Bin Ali.

The attack comes a day after Tunisian security officials confirmed the death in neighboring Libya of a leading suspect in several attacks in Tunis, including the killings of two high-profile opposition figures.

Roughly 3,000 Tunisians have also left the country to fight for radical groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in Syria, Iraq and Libya, sparking fears that returning fighters could carry out attacks at home.