

WORLD IN BRIEF

Associated Press

Berlin truck attack suspect killed in Milan police shootout

ROME — The Tunisian man suspected of driving a truck into a crowded Christmas market in Berlin was killed early today in a shootout with police in Milan, ending a Europe-wide manhunt, Italy's interior minister said.

Checks conducted after the shootout showed "the person killed, without a shadow of a doubt, is Anis Amri, the suspect of the terrorist attack," Interior Minister Marco Minniti said.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the Monday attack in Berlin, which killed 12 and injured 56 others.

Amri, who had spent time in prison in Italy, was stopped by two officers during a routine police check in the Sesto San Giovanni neighborhood of Milan early today. He pulled a gun from his backpack after being asked to show his identity papers and was killed in the ensuing shootout.

One of the two officers was shot by Amri and is in the hospital, but his condition is not life-threatening, Minniti said. The other officer fatally shot Amri.

Trump: US must 'greatly strengthen' nuclear capability

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald Trump on Thursday abruptly called for the United States to "greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability" until the rest of the world "comes to its senses" regarding nuclear weapons.

His comments on Twitter came hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin said strengthening his country's nuclear capabilities should be a chief military objective in the coming year. The president-elect's statement also followed his meetings a day earlier with top Pentagon officials and defense contractors.

Trump, who is spending the holidays at his palatial private club in Florida, did not expand on the actions he wants the U.S. to take or say why he raised the issue Thursday.

Spokesman Jason Miller said the president-elect was referring to the threat of nuclear proliferation "particularly to and among terrorist organizations and unstable and rogue regimes." Miller said Trump sees modernizing the nation's deterrent capability "as a vital way to pursue peace through strength."

If Trump were to seek an expansion of the nuclear stockpiles, it would mark a sharp shift in U.S. national security policy. President Barack Obama has made nuclear non-proliferation a centerpiece of his agenda, calling in 2009 for the U.S. to lead efforts to rid the world of nuclear weapons — a goal he acknowledged would not be accomplished quickly or easily.

Backlash kicked up as Rockettes picked for inauguration

NEW YORK — The Radio City Rockettes will be dancing at President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration next month but not everyone is kicking up their heels at the booking.

One of the famed dancers took to Instagram to say she was "embarrassed and disappointed" by the gig, triggering calls for a boycott by some on social media. Critics have posted the phone numbers of the dancers' union and the Rockette's employer to urge complaints.

But Madison Square Garden Company, which employs the dancers, said today no dancers are being compelled to attend the event.

"For a Rockette to be considered for an event, they must voluntarily sign up and are never told they have to perform at a particular event, including the inaugural. It is always their choice. In fact, for the coming inauguration, we had more Rockettes request to participate than we have slots available."

Many on social media believed attendance was mandatory, including Julissa Sabino, a performer who is part of the union, who tweeted that the issue "breaks my heart" and urged supporters to "help these ladies." Autumn Withers, a former Rockette, supported a boycott, saying "take a knee, ladies!"

The Rockettes, who have performed at Radio City Music Hall since the 1930s, have previously appeared in Super Bowl half-time shows, Macy's Thanksgiving Day parades and George W. Bush's inaugurations in 2001 and 2005.

The Rockettes who choose to attend will join The Mormon Tabernacle Choir at the swearing-in ceremony on Jan. 20. Earlier this month, Trump's inaugural committee announced that "America's Got Talent" star Jackie Evancho will be singing the national anthem at the ceremony.

Four Washington state electors to be fined \$1,000 for vote

OLYMPIA, Wash. — Four Washington state electors who cast their vote for someone other than Democrat Hillary Clinton will each be fined \$1,000 next week, the secretary of state's office said Thursday.

David Ammons, a spokesman for Secretary of State Kim Wyman, told The Associated Press that the electors will have 60 days to pay the fine, and said the office is putting together an appeals process in case of a challenge.

Clinton won the state's popular vote last month, earning her 12 electoral votes. Under state law, presidential electors — who are chosen by their party at their state convention — sign a pledge to vote for their party's nominees for president and vice president.

But during Monday's Electoral College vote in Olympia, Clinton got just eight votes, while former Secretary of State Colin Powell got three and Native American tribal elder and activist Faith Spotted Eagle got one vote.



AP Photo/Richard Drew

Dancers from the Radio City Rockettes promote their "New York Spectacular" show by performing on the marquee of Radio City Music Hall in New York in June. The Radio City Rockettes have been signed on to dance at President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration next month.

Republican Donald Trump finished with 304 votes — winning all but two of the Electoral College votes he claimed on Election Day — and Clinton had 227 after losing five — the four in Washington state and one in Hawaii. It takes 270 Electoral College votes to win the presidency.

Aleppo confronts vast destruction left by four years of war

BEIRUT — After more than four years of brutal street fighting and punishing aerial bombardments, the staggering extent of destruction in Aleppo begins to emerge: Tens of thousands of homes and apartments are uninhabitable, most factories have been looted or destroyed and some ancient landmarks have been reduced to rubble.

Reconstruction would likely take years and cost tens of billions of dollars, experts say. Some of Aleppo's centuries-old cultural heritage may have been lost for good. And healing the wounds in a city once split between a wealthier, pro-government west and a poorer, pro-rebel east could take even greater effort.

Damage assessments emerged as the Syrian government announced Thursday that it had assumed full control of the city — a significant victory in a nearly six-year battle with an armed opposition trying to unseat President Bashar Assad. In recent months, rebels rapidly lost ground in the city as Assad and military allies Russia and Iran stepped up attacks.

Located at the crossroads of ancient trade routes, Aleppo was Syria's biggest city before the war, with more than 3 million residents and a world-famous cuisine.

It served as the country's industrial hub, home to factories producing textiles, plastics and pharmaceuticals. Its ancient center, recognized as a World Heritage site, drew large numbers of tourists.

Today, Aleppo "resembles those cities that were stricken during World War II," said Maamoun Abdul-Karim, head of the government's museums and archaeology department. The scale of devastation has already evoked comparisons with cities like Grozny and Dresden.

Christmas in N. Korea: Lights and trees, but void of Jesus

PYONGYANG, North Korea — If Santa Claus stops in North Korea this year, he'll find some trees and lights and might even hear a Christmas song or two. But he won't encounter even a hint of what Christmas actually means — not under a regime that sees foreign religion a very real threat.

There are almost no practicing Christians in North Korea. But there used to be. And while the trappings of the holiday season they once celebrated haven't been completely expunged, any connections they had to the birth of Jesus have been thoroughly erased.

Take Christmas trees, for example.

They aren't especially hard to find in Pyongyang, especially in upscale restaurants or shops that cater to the local elite and the small community of resident foreigners. A waist-high tree was long a feature at the offices of the Koryolink mobile phone provider.

The trees are often decorated with colorful lights and shiny baubles, but none of the displays have explicitly religious associations. Many are up all year, further diluting their Christmas connotation.

Germany: Two detained over suspected mall attack plot

BERLIN — Two Kosovo-born brothers have been detained on suspicion they were planning to carry out an attack on a shopping mall in western Germany, days after a truck attack in Berlin

that killed 12 people.

Police said today that the men, aged 28 and 31, were detained in Duisburg in the industrial Ruhr region shortly after midnight.

Authorities suspect the two men may have been planning an attack on the Centro mall in nearby Oberhausen. They are now probing what the pair's intentions were and whether anyone else was involved.

Police said in a statement that they increased their presence at Centro and a nearby Christmas market on Thursday evening after receiving a tip from "security sources."

Officers in uniform and plain clothes patrolled the area, but the mall remained open.

Australia police: Christmas Day bomb plot foiled, five detained

CANBERRA, Australia — Police in Australia have detained five men suspected of planning a series of Christmas Day attacks using explosives, knives and a gun in the heart of the country's second-largest city, officials said today.

The suspects were inspired by the Islamic State group and planned attacks on Melbourne's iconic Flinders Street train station, neighboring Federation Square, a fashionable bar and restaurant precinct, and St. Paul's Cathedral, an Anglican church, Victoria state Police Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton said.

He said they had been plotting the attack for three weeks. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said it was one of the most substantial plots that have been disrupted over the last several years.

The arrests came after a truck smashed into a Christmas market in Berlin on Monday, killing 12 people. A manhunt is underway for the person behind that attack, which prompted increases in security around the world.

Two of seven people initially arrested in raids Thursday night and this morning in Melbourne — a 26-year-old man and a 20-year-old woman — were released without being charged, police said.

AP: Eric Trump Foundation flouts charity standards

A charity operated by one of Donald Trump's sons flouts philanthropic standards by financially benefiting charities connected to the Trump family and members of the charity's board, an Associated Press investigation shows.

The AP found that Eric Trump has exaggerated the size of his foundation and the donations it receives. At the same time, the charity's payments for services or donations to other groups repeatedly went to one of Donald Trump's private golf clubs and to charities linked to the Trumps by corporate, family or philanthropic relationships.

The Eric Trump Foundation has raised \$7.3 million mostly for children ill with cancer, according to IRS filings since 2007.

The charity has long raised money from donors willing to make large contributions to hobnob with the Trumps. For example, golf at the foundation's chief 2015 fundraiser cost up to \$50,000 per foursome. Donald Trump often attends these events, which include a gala dinner, and mixes with the guests and has his photo taken.

On Wednesday, the younger Trump said he'll cease soliciting donations for his nonprofit to avoid accusations that contributions could be perceived as a means to buy access to the Trump White House.

The announcement to stop raising money for the foundation followed cancellation of an online auction for "Coffee with Ivanka," Eric's sister.

The auction was to be sponsored by the Eric Trump Foundation, whose proceeds generally benefit St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee.

Russia's Putin praises Trump's judgment, rejects hacking claims

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV
Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russian President Vladimir Putin voiced hope today that frayed relations with the U.S. will improve once Donald Trump becomes president despite his pledge to strengthen the U.S.'s nuclear arsenal.

Speaking during a marathon end-of-year news conference that lasted the best part of four hours, Putin heaped praise on the president-elect while downplaying any concerns stemming from Trump's

support for a strengthened U.S. nuclear capability.

Putin also used the opportunity offered by the press conference to lambast Trump's rivals in the Democratic Party for seeking to blame their defeat in November's election to hacking accusations against Moscow.

"They are losing on all fronts, and they are trying to find the culprits elsewhere," he said. "They are humiliating themselves. They must know how to lose with dignity."

Asked how he responded to President Barack Obama's hacking accusations during a

conversation shortly before the vote that Russia was involved in the hacking of Democratic Party officials' emails, Putin said he wouldn't divulge details of a confidential talk.

"The most important thing is the substance of the information the hackers have presented to the public opinion," Putin said, adding that the Democrats should have apologized to Americans over the "manipulations" the emails revealed.

"The current administration and the Democratic Party's leadership are trying to shift the blame for all their failures to external factors," Putin said.

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