



AP Photo/Evan Vucci
In this March 16, photo, federal appeals court judge Merrick Garland, center, speaks during an announcement in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington.

Garland complicates presidential campaign

WASHINGTON (AP) — In choosing a centrist judge with Republican appeal, President Barack Obama hoped to corner GOP opponents who pledge to block his Supreme Court pick. He also boxed in the Democrats vying to succeed him.

For Hillary Clinton, locked in a fight for the hearts of progressive voters, Merrick Garland’s nomination presents a political puzzle. She had no choice but to embrace the mild-mannered moderate whom Democrats plan to make into a symbol of Republican obstruction. But she does not want to hold him so close that she angers the party’s left, wary of Garland and worried the party may end up forfeiting a chance to install a more liberal justice on the court.

Clinton’s dilemma was evident in her campaign’s cautious reaction to Obama’s choice. In a statement, she mentioned Garland’s “considerable experience” in the judiciary and public service, his “brilliant legal mind” and past achievement of “bipartisan support and admiration.”

But her campaign would not say whether she would commit to Garland for the long haul, arguing

that Republicans won’t be able to sustain denying the judge a Senate vote. Clinton’s campaign said it was unlikely there will still be a vacancy when she wins the White House — sidestepping the issue of whether she would nominate him if elected.

It’s a pressing question for liberals who are concerned Republicans may delay Garland’s nomination through the election — to please their base — but then move to quickly confirm the judge before a new Democratic president takes office to avoid a more liberal nominee in 2017.

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, a liberal favorite, addressed those worries directly. Sanders said Thursday that if he won the White House, he would ask Obama to withdraw Garland’s nomination so he could make his own choice.

Garland “would not have been my nominee,” Sanders said in an interview with The Associated Press, though he also said Garland had an “incredibly strong judicial record” and he would support him.

Garland was appointed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia by Clinton’s husband, Bill, in 1997.

Top fugitive in Paris attacks captured during Brussels raid

Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Police raiding an apartment building captured Europe’s most wanted fugitive Friday, arresting the prime suspect in last year’s deadly Paris attacks in the same Brussels neighborhood where he grew up.

Hours later, the French president said more people were involved in the attacks than initially thought, and predicted more arrests would follow.

Salah Abdeslam, 26, is a childhood friend of the suspected ringleader of the attacks. Investigators believe he drove a car carrying a group of gunmen who took part in the shootings, rented rooms and shopped for detonators. He may have been planning a suicide attack himself.

After the bloodbath, he slipped through a dragnet to return to Brussels and eluded capture for four months, despite an international manhunt. He was believed to have slipped through police fingers multiple times. At one point, Belgian authorities locked down their capital for several days but failed to find him.

His capture brought instant relief to police and ordinary people in France and Belgium who had been looking over their shoulder for Abdeslam since Nov. 13, when Islamic extremist attackers fanned out across the French capital and killed 130 people at a rock concert, the national stadium and cafes. It was France’s deadliest attack in decades.

Abdeslam and four other suspects were detained in Friday’s raid, including three members of a family that sheltered him. Abdeslam was shot in the leg and was hospitalized, and another arrested with him was also wounded, officials said.

During Friday’s police operation, a phalanx of officers in camouflage, masks and riot helmets marched through the neighborhood with guns and automatic weapons drawn, escorting people out of buildings.

A witness described hearing gunshots and officers repeatedly yelling over a loudspeaker to suspects holed up inside the apartment building.

Authorities first sealed off the neighborhood. Then police began shouting to a particular apartment, demanding that the occupants come out with their hands up, said Fatiha Hrika, a 39-year-old child-care worker who lives a



VTM via AP
In this framegrab taken from VTM, armed police officers escort a suspect to a police vehicle during a raid in the Molenbeek neighborhood of Brussels on Friday.

few doors down from where the raid happened.

After shots were fired, she told The Associated Press, “they piled in. We heard noises all around. And that’s when they pulled out the Salah (guy.) They put him to the ground.”

She described seeing the suspect put into an ambulance followed by a SWAT team.

France’s BFM television broadcast images of police tugging a man with a white hooded sweatshirt toward a police car, as he dragged his left leg as if it were injured.

Abdeslam was not armed but did not immediately obey orders when confronted by police, Belgian prosecutor Eric Van der Sypt said.

It was possible he had spent days, weeks or months in the apartment, according to Van der Sypt, who said the investigation would continue day and night.

French President Francois Hollande said authorities will continue hunting for anyone who aided the attacks in any way.

He said those people are much more numerous than authorities had believed, and that the French government would seek to have Abdeslam extradited.

Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel called Friday’s arrests a success in the “fight against terrorism.”

President Barack Obama congratulated the leaders of Belgium and France over the arrest, in phone calls with both men, the White House said in a statement.

Two other people believed linked to the attacks were still being sought, including fellow Molenbeek resident Mohamed Abrini and a man known under the alias of Soufiane Kayal.

Friday’s capture of Abdeslam came after Belgian authorities said they found his fingerprints in an apartment raided earlier this week in another Brussels neighborhood.

In that raid, a man believed to have been an accomplice of Abdeslam — Mohamed Belkaid — was shot dead, Belgian prosecutors said. But two men escaped from the apartment, one of whom appears to have been Abdeslam.

Most of the Paris attackers died on the night of the attacks, including Abdeslam’s brother Brahim, who blew himself up. Brahim Abdeslam was buried in the Brussels area Thursday.

Salah’s Abdeslam’s role in the attacks has never been clearly spelled out. The car he drove was abandoned in northern Paris, and his mobile phone and an explosive vest he may have used were later found in the Paris suburb of Montrouge, raising the possibility that he aborted his mission, either ditching a malfunctioning vest or fleeing in fear.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Fourteen at nuke base probed for illegal drug activity

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fourteen members of an Air Force unit responsible for guarding nuclear missiles in Wyoming, Colorado and Nebraska are under investigation for possible illegal drug activity, including cases involving cocaine use, defense officials said Friday.

The probe is a fresh blow to a nuclear missile corps that has been under intense scrutiny in recent years for a string of lapses in training and personal conduct, first revealed by The Associated Press. The Air Force has said repeatedly over the past year that it is making significant changes aimed at lifting morale and improving performance.

The investigation at F.E. Warren Air Force Base, home of the 90th Missile Wing, near Cheyenne, Wyoming, was announced by Gen. Robin Rand, the four-star commander of Air Force Global Strike Command. The command is responsible for the entire fleet of 450 Minuteman 3 nuclear missiles that stand in underground launch silos, one third of them operated by the 90th Missile Wing. The missile force is on alert 24 hours a day, year-round, requiring strict adherence to performance standards by the men and women who operate, maintain and protect them.

Rand, speaking by telephone from his headquarters at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, said the 14 airmen under investigation range in rank from Airman 1st Class to Senior Airman and are members of the security group at F.E. Warren that is responsible for securing the missile fields and convoys that move nuclear weapons.

Rand said the 14 are accused of off-duty drug “activity,” which he refused to further define. He said the allegations were “credible.”

Jury awards Hulk Hogan \$115 million in Gawker sex tape suit

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP) — A jury sided with ex-pro wrestler Hulk Hogan on Friday and awarded him \$115 million in his sex tape lawsuit against Gawker.

The jurors reached the decision Friday evening, less than six hours after they began deliberations. The trial lasted two weeks.

Earlier Friday, in spirited closing arguments, lawyers for Hogan and Gawker discussed themes of personal life versus celebrity, and freedom of speech versus the right to privacy.

Hogan, whose given name is Terry Bollea, sued Gawker for \$100 million for posting a video of him having sex with his former best friend’s wife. Hogan contended the 2012 post violated his privacy.

Hogan’s attorneys told jurors this is the core of the case: “Gawker took a

secretly recorded sex tape and put it on the Internet.”

They said Hogan didn’t consent to the video, that Gawker didn’t follow usual journalism procedures before posting it and that the video wasn’t newsworthy. Gawker did not try to contact Bollea or the woman in the video, and nor did the website contact the woman’s husband, DJ Bubba The Love Sponge Clem, who recorded the video.

It was never conclusively determined during trial who leaked the video to the media.

Hogan didn’t ask for any of this to happen, lawyer Kenneth Turkel said, adding that Bollea, the private man, expected privacy during an intimate moment. Much was made during the trial of Hogan’s celebrity persona versus Bollea’s privacy.

“I want you to imagine the fact that for 35 plus years he is essentially an actor, an entertainer, who has played the same role,” said Turkel.

He said Hogan “has every right, every right, to keep

whatever precious private moments in his life, which for this gentlemen are few.”

Gawker’s attorneys told the jury that the video is “not like a real celebrity sex tape” and urged them to watch the video, which contains nine seconds of sexual content.

Syrian troops push forward with Russian support

BEIRUT (AP) — Backed by Russian aircraft, Syrian troops pushed Friday toward the historic central town of Palmyra in an offensive to recapture it from the Islamic

State group whose fighters have damaged some of the world’s most precious archaeological sites since they overran the town last May.

After night fell, Syria’s state news agency SANA reported that the offensive advanced toward Palmyra and that scores of IS fighters have been killed or wounded in Syrian artillery fire.

Activists who monitor the Syrian conflict reported intense airstrikes in Palmyra and its suburbs. In Moscow, a Russian Defense Ministry official confirmed his country’s warplanes in Syria were flying in support of the

Syrian offensive.

Lt. Gen. Sergei Rudskoi said Russian aircraft were conducting 20-25 sorties a day in support of the Palmyra offensive, even though Russia this week drew down its military presence in Syria after President Vladimir Putin ordered a partial pullout of Russian aircraft and forces from Syria, in support of the Geneva peace talks.

The U.N.-brokered talks between representatives of the Syrian government and the Western-backed opposition adjourned for the weekend after five days of proximity discussions.

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