

Invoking Syria, policeman kills Russian ambassador to Turkey

By **BURHAN OZBILICI** and **SUZAN FRASER**
Associated Press

over the region's conflict and complex web of alliances and relationships.

ANKARA, Turkey — A Turkish policeman fatally shot Russia's ambassador to Turkey on Monday in front of a shocked gathering at a photo exhibit and then, pacing near the body of his victim, appeared to condemn Russia's military role in Syria, shouting: "Don't forget Aleppo! Don't forget Syria!"

The leaders of Turkey and Russia said the attack in Ankara, the Turkish capital, was an attempt to disrupt efforts to repair ties between their countries, which have backed opposing sides in the Syrian civil war.

An Associated Press photographer and others at the art gallery watched in horror as the gunman, who was wearing a dark suit and tie, fired at least eight shots, at one point walking around Ambassador Andrei Karlov as he lay motionless and shooting him again at close range.

The assailant, who was identified as Mevlut Mert Altintas, a 22-year-old member of Ankara's riot police squad, was later killed in a shootout with police. Three other people were wounded in the attack, authorities said.

The assassination came after days of protests by Turks angry over Russia's support for President Bashar Assad in the Syrian conflict and Russia's role in the bombardment and destruction of Aleppo, Syria's largest city.

The gunman shouted about Aleppo in Turkish, and also yelled "Allahu akbar," the Arabic phrase for "God is great," continuing in Arabic: "We are the descendants of those who supported the Prophet Muhammad, for jihad."

The attack, condemned by the White House and the United Nations, was another sign of how Turkey, a NATO member and a partner in the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State group, is struggling to contain multiple security threats. The war in Syria has been a major problem for years, sending several million refugees into Turkey and, more recently, drawing in Turkish troops.

Turkey has become accustomed to deadly attacks — Kurdish militants claimed responsibility for Dec. 10 bombings in Istanbul that killed 44 people, many of them police.

The spectacle of 62-year-old Karlov's assassination by a member of the Turkish security forces at a photography exhibit meant to highlight Russian culture reinforced the sense of unease

It came a day before a key meeting about Syria to be held in Moscow. Those attending include the foreign and defense ministers from Turkey, an opponent of Assad, and Russia and Iran, backers of the Syrian regime.

Russian President Vladimir Putin described the killing of Karlov as an attempt to damage Russia-Turkey ties "and to thwart a peace process in Syria which Russia, Turkey and Iran have been actively trying to promote."

Putin said he and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan agreed in a phone call that Russian investigators would fly to Ankara to conduct a joint probe with their Turkish counterparts.

"We must know who was directing the killer," Putin said in televised remarks. He ordered top officials to strengthen protection of the Turkish Embassy in Moscow and asked Turkey to increase security at the Russian mission in Ankara.

In a video message shown on several Turkish TV channels, Erdogan said: "This is a provocation to damage the normalization process of Turkish-Russian relations. But both the Russian and Turkish administrations have the determination not to fall for this provocation."



AP Photo/Burhan Ozbilici
Mevlut Mert Altintas gestures after shooting the Russian Ambassador to Turkey, Andrei Karlov, at a photo gallery in Ankara, Turkey, Monday.

Photographer captures attack

EDITOR'S NOTE: Associated Press photographer Burhan Ozbilici was attending a photo exhibition Monday when a Turkish policeman opened fire, killing Russia's ambassador to Turkey.

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — The event seemed routine, the opening of an exhibit of photographs of Russia. So when a man in a dark suit and tie pulled out a gun, I was stunned and thought it was a theatrical flourish.

Instead, it was a coolly calculated assassination, unfolding in front of me and others who scrambled, terrified, for cover as the trim man with short hair gunned down the Russian ambassador.

The gunshots, at least eight of them, were loud in the pristine art gallery. Pandemonium erupted. People screamed, hid behind columns and under tables and lay on the floor. I was afraid and confused, but found partial cover behind a wall and did my job: taking photographs.

The exhibition, titled "From Kaliningrad to Kamchatka, from the eyes of travelers" featured photos from Russia's westernmost Baltic region to the Kamchatka Peninsula, in the east. I decided to attend simply because it was on my way home from the Ankara office.

When I arrived, the speeches

had already begun. After Russian Ambassador Andrei Karlov began to make his address, I moved closer to photograph him, thinking the pictures would come in useful for stories on Turkish-Russian relations.

He was speaking softly and — from what I could tell — lovingly about his homeland, stopping occasionally to allow the translator to relay his words in Turkish. I remember thinking how calm and humble he seemed.

Then came the gunshots in quick succession, and panic in the audience. The ambassador's body lay on the floor, just yards away from me. I couldn't see any blood around him; I think he may have been shot in the back.

It took me a few seconds to realize what had happened: A man had died in front of me; a life had disappeared before my eyes.

I moved back and to the left, while the gunman — later identified as police officer Mevlut Mert Altintas — gestured with his gun at people cowering on the right side of the room.

At first, I couldn't figure out what had motivated the shooter. I thought he might be a Chechen militant. But people later said he was shouting about the Syrian city of Aleppo.

So he was probably angry about Russian bombardments of

Aleppo that were aimed at driving out anti-government rebels. Many civilians have been killed in the fighting.

He also shouted "Allahu akbar," but I couldn't understand the rest of what he said in Arabic.

The gunman was agitated. He walked around the ambassador's body, smashing some of the photos hanging on the wall.

I was, of course, fearful and knew of the danger if the gunman turned toward me. But I advanced a little and photographed the man as he hectorated his desperate, captive audience.

This is what I was thinking: "I'm here. Even if I get hit and injured, or killed, I'm a journalist. I have to do my work. I could run away without making any photos. ... But I wouldn't have a proper answer if people later ask me: 'Why didn't you take pictures?'"

I even thought about friends and colleagues who have died while taking photographs in conflict zones over the years.

As my mind raced, I saw that the man was agitated — and yet, he was, strangely, in control of himself. He shouted at everyone to stand back. Security guards ordered us to vacate the hall and we left.

When I returned to the office to edit my photos, I was shocked to see that the shooter was actually standing behind the ambassador as he spoke. Like a friend, or a bodyguard.

U.N. approves Aleppo monitors as evacuations from city proceed

BEIRUT (AP) — The leaders of Russia and Iran, military allies of Syria's president, talked Monday about joining forces to reach a quick political settlement in Syria, as the country's largest city, Aleppo, was poised to return to full government control.

Syrian state TV said it expected the evacuation of thousands of civilians and fighters from the last opposition footholds in Aleppo to be completed by early Tuesday.

As more people left the city, the U.N. Security council approved a compromise French-Russian resolution urging the immediate deployment of U.N. monitors to watch over the evacuation and "the well-being of civilians" remaining in the city. U.N. officials said more than 100 U.N. humanitarian staff already on the ground in Aleppo, most of them Syrian nationals, could be used in that role.

France's U.N. Ambassador Francois Delattre said the goal of the resolution is "to avoid new mass atrocities by the forces on the ground and the militias in particular." But thousands of people have already been evacuated from the city and the operation could be completed before the observers arrive.

The departure of the last rebels from Aleppo would close another chapter in Syria's civil war and would give President Bashar Assad a significant symbolic and strategic victory.

Almost six years after the outbreak of an armed rebellion against Assad, the Syrian leader will be in charge again of the country's five largest cities and the Mediterranean coast.

The presidents of Russia and Iran spoke by phone Monday to discuss the next moves. The Kremlin said Vladimir Putin and Hassan Rouhani "underlined the need for joint efforts to launch a real political process aimed at a quick settlement in Syria."

The leaders noted that a quick launch of talks between the Syrian government and the opposition in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, would be an important step toward that goal, a Kremlin statement said.

The conversation came a day before a scheduled meeting of foreign and defense ministers of Russia, Turkey and Iran in Moscow. Russia and Iran have backed Assad, while Turkey has supported the opposition.

The U.N. special envoy for Syria, Staffan De Mistura, welcomed the Moscow meeting and any effort that results in a cessation of hostilities.

He announced that the United Nations hopes to arrange negotiations between the government and opposition in Geneva on Feb. 8.

The Special Envoy will follow with interest the meeting tomorrow between the governments of the Russian Federation, the Republic of Turkey, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. He welcomes any effort that can bring about a cessation of hostilities, which remains a cornerstone of the framework laid down in Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) in parallel with the political process. He has also taken note of the possibility that this initiative, and other initiatives, can promote intra-Syrian dialogue. He welcomes all such efforts as potential contributions to the UN process.

Truck rams German Christmas market, killing at least nine

By **KIRSTEN GRIESHABER**
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BERLIN — A truck rammed into a crowded Christmas market in central Berlin on Monday evening, killing at least nine people and injuring around 50 as it tore through tables and wooden stands. Police said a suspect believed to be the driver was arrested nearby and a passenger died as paramedics were treating him.

The popular Christmas market outside the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church was filled with a mix of tourists and locals when the large Scania truck hurtled into it. Germany's top security official said initial evidence pointed to an intentional act, and the White House condemned "what appears to have been a terrorist attack."

Mike Fox, visiting from Birmingham, England, told The Associated Press that the truck missed him by about three meters (yards). Fox said he helped people who appeared to have broken limbs, and that others were trapped under Christmas stands.

"You do what you can to help who you can, really. It happened so fast that there was nothing we could do



AP Photo/Michael Sohn
Firefighters look at a toppled Christmas tree after a truck ran into a crowded Christmas market and killed several people in Berlin, Germany, Monday.

to stop it — if we'd tried to stop it we would have been crushed," Fox said.

The truck, which was loaded with steel beams, came to a halt on a sidewalk on one side of the market. It had just rammed a large stand called "Fascination Christmas," tearing off one side and knocking down a large Christmas tree. The three-meter tree lay in the street, red and gold orna-

mental balls still attached to its limbs and a golden star at the top.

The crash came less than a month after the U.S. State Department called for caution in markets and other public places across Europe, saying extremist groups including Islamic State and al-Qaida were focusing "on the upcoming holiday season and associated events."

The Islamic State group

and al-Qaida have both called on followers to use trucks in particular to attack crowds. On July 14, a truck plowed into Bastille Day revelers in the southern French city of Nice, killing 86 people. Islamic State claimed responsibility for that attack, which was carried out by a Tunisian living in France.

Following that attack there were calls to block off and better protect high-pro-

file public gatherings. There were no barriers around the Christmas market on Monday.

After the attack, dozens of ambulances lined the streets waiting to evacuate people, and heavily armed police patrolled. Authorities on Twitter urged people to stay away from the area, saying they need to keep the streets clear for rescue vehicles.

Among the dead was a passenger in the truck, who succumbed as paramedics treated him, Berlin police spokesman Winfried Wenzel said. He offered no further details.

A suspect believed to be the driver was picked up about 1½ miles away, near Berlin's Victory Column monument. He was being interrogated, Wenzel said. The truck was registered in

Poland, and police said it was believed to be stolen from a building site there.

The Polish owner of the truck said he feared the vehicle, driven by his cousin, may have been hijacked. Ariel Zurawski said he last spoke with the driver around noon, and the driver told him he was in Berlin and scheduled to unload Tuesday morning. "They must have done something to my driver," he told TVN24.

Federal prosecutors, who handle terrorism cases, took over the investigation, according to German Justice Minister Heiko Maas. In Washington, White House National Security Council spokesman Ned Price said the United States was in contact with German officials and ready to help in the investigation and response.

Merry Christmas!

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