

UK Continues Arrests Despite Reducing Threat Level



British police standing alongside an army soldier at Number 10 Downing Street

LONDON (Dispatches) -- British police said they arrested two more people during raids Saturday over the Manchester concert bombing, as Prime Minister Theresa May announced a reduction in the country's threat level from critical to severe.

The two men, aged 20 and 22, were arrested in North Manchester early Saturday after police gained entry to an address using a controlled explosion, and a bomb disposal team was later involved in a raid in Moss Side, to the south of the city.

The arrests brought to 11 the number of sus-

pects held in Britain over Monday's blast at a concert, in which 22 people died and 116 were injured, and for which the Daesh group has claimed responsibility.

Police in Libya also detained the father and brother of 22-year-old bomber Salman Abedi.

British police on Saturday said they were raiding an address in Moss Side, with AFP staff reporting that a bomb disposal vehicle was at the scene and that the area was being evacuated.

Mark Rowley, head of Britain's counter-terrorism police, said on Friday that police

had captured "a large part of the network" linked to the bombing, in which seven children aged under 18 were among the 22 dead.

"We are very happy we've got our hands around some of the key players that we are concerned about but there's still a little bit more to do," he said.

Prime Minister May said Saturday that the terror threat level had been reduced from critical - its highest level - to severe, having been raised in the wake of the attack.

"There are now 11 suspects in custody," she said in a statement. "In the light of the developments, the independent joint terrorism analysis centre has this morning taken the decision to reduce the threat level from critical to severe."

"We should be clear about what this means: A threat level of severe means an attack is highly likely, the country should remain vigilant."

She also announced that Operation Temperer, which involved the deployment of armed forces personnel patrolling alongside police, would wind down after the bank holiday weekend.

Armed police will be on patrol over the holiday weekend, with security increased at football's showpiece FA Cup final at London's Wembley Stadium on Saturday.

The bombing was the latest in a series of Daesh-claimed attacks in Europe.

Authorities are currently handling 500 terror-related investigations into 3,000 individuals, and it was revealed Friday that around 20,000 more people are on the intelligence radar as posing a "residual risk".

Militia Clashes Leave 52 Dead in Libya



A damaged compound occupied by a Libyan self-declared rival prime minister is seen after it was taken over by armed groups aligned with a UN-backed government in heavy fighting, in Tripoli, Libya, March 15, 2017.

TRIPOLI (AFP) -- Forces loyal to Libya's unity government said Saturday that 52 of its fighters were killed as they repelled rival militias in fierce clashes in the capital Tripoli.

Apart from sporadic gunfire in southern Tripoli, calm returned to the city Saturday, the first day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Among the 52 killed in Friday's clashes which centered on the southern district of Abu Slim, said Hashem Bichr, a security official of the Government of National Accord, were 17 members of pro-GNA forces who had been "executed".

There was no immediate confirmation from medical or other independent sources of the death toll, updated from Friday's health ministry figures of 28 dead and more than 100 wounded that did not give a breakdown of the casualties.

UN special envoy Martin Kobler condemned the fighting in which heavy artillery and tanks were used, urging restraint from all sides.

Forces of the UN-backed GNA announced on their Facebook page they had defeated rival militias and taken control of a prison holding key leaders of the ousted regime of Muammar Kaddafi

including his last premier, Baghdadi al-Mahmudi, and former intelligence chief Abdullah Senussi.

Al-Hadhba jail had been under the control of the Fajr Libya militia coalition, which had seized Tripoli in 2014 and set up a government headed by Khalifa Ghweil.

The Libyan capital has been gripped by a power struggle ever since a NATO-backed uprising toppled longtime dictator Kaddafi in 2011.

The latest fighting started around a complex of luxury villas that until March served as headquarters of militias loyal to Ghweil, who was ousted when the GNA took office last year but refuses to recognize the new administration.

Loyalist forces seized the villas in four days of intense fighting in March that saw them expand their control over the capital.

Tripoli had been relatively calm since, but dozens of armed groups still operate and several parts of Tripoli remain beyond its control.

Relying on militia support and pitted against a rival administration in eastern Libya, the GNA has struggled to assert its authority.

In a statement Friday, the GNA blamed Ghweil and Salah Badi, another leader of Fajr Libya, for Friday's violence.

"This is their gift to the people for the month of Ramadan," it said in a statement.

China Urges Hong Kong to Implement Security Laws

HONG KONG (Reuters) -- A top Chinese official said Saturday Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy must not be taken as a license to confront Beijing, and urged the territory's government to implement contentious new national security laws.

The comments by Zhang Dejiang, China's number three official who oversees Hong Kong affairs, highlight growing concerns at Beijing's top leadership about a fledgling independence or secessionist movement in the former British colony.

They come as Hong Kong, which returned to mainland rule in 1997 amid promises of wide-ranging autonomy under the formula of "one country, two systems", is set to celebrate the 20th anniversary of its handover on July 1, with Chinese president Xi Jinping widely expected to visit the city.

In some of his strongest comments yet, Zhang, the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress,

warned in a speech that Hong Kong's autonomy should not be used as a license to challenge the central government's authority.

"Under 'One Country, Two Systems,' the Central Government and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's power relationship is... not one of power sharing," Zhang said during an official forum discussing Hong Kong's mini-constitution, in footage carried by Hong Kong's Cable TV.

"Under no condition should the high degree of autonomy be used as a guise to confront the Central Government's authority."

After the 2014 "Umbrella Movement" protests, where hundreds of thousands occupied the streets for months and demanded full democracy, a nascent independence movement emerged, though it lost momentum after China stepped in last year to effectively disqualify two of the movement's young leaders elected into legislature.

Apart from the independence movement,

another group of activists headed by student protest leader Joshua Wong called for self-determination rights for the former colony.

Zhang slammed both movements Saturday.

"In practice they attempt to turn Hong Kong into an independent or semi-independent political entity, and to secede Hong Kong from the country," Zhang said.

"We cannot ignore these actions. The (Hong Kong government) should implement their constitutional responsibility under the Basic Law to enact laws over national security, and resolutely halt any behavior and action that endanger national unity."

Under Hong Kong's mini-constitution, known as the Basic Law, the government is expected to toughen up the territory's existing national security laws, but has held off on doing so since its last attempt in 2003 triggered the first massive street protests after the handover.

Philippines Bombs City After Daesh 'Invasion'



A fire rages at houses following airstrikes by Philippine Air Force in Marawi, southern Philippines, Saturday, May 27, 2017.

MARAWI, Philippines (Dispatches) -- Philippine security forces dropped more bombs Saturday on a southern city where they have been battling Takfiri militants for five days, vowing no let up despite the start of Ramadan.

President Rodrigo Duterte declared martial law across the southern third of the Philippines in response to the clashes, which have claimed at least 48 lives and he has said are part of a campaign by Daesh to establish a local caliphate.

"We have identified where they are consolidating so we are doing surgical air strikes to destroy the local terrorist group," military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Jo-ar Herrera told AFP.

Truckloads of marines were also seen driving into Marawi. One of the biggest Muslim-populated cities in the mainly Catholic Philippines, its population of about 200,000 residents had largely been evacuated because of the fighting.

The violence erupted Tuesday when dozens of gunmen went on a rampage throughout Marawi in response to an attempt by security forces to arrest Isnilon Hapilon, a veteran Filipino militant regarded as the local leader of Daesh.

The gunmen planted black Daesh flags, took a priest and up to 14 other people hostage from a church, and set fire to build-

ings.

Thirteen soldiers, two policemen and 31 militants have died in the fighting, according to authorities.

Two civilians were also confirmed killed inside a hospital that the gunmen had occupied Tuesday, and the military has said it investigating reports that nine people were murdered at a checkpoint the militants had set up.

Duterte has vowed to extinguish the threat of the militants, whom he has said belong to the local Maute terrorist group but are being backed by criminals in the area.

Nevertheless, Duterte also said Friday that he was prepared to talk with the group's leaders.

His spokesman, Ernesto Abella, said this was partly an offer made in the spirit of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began in the Philippines Saturday.

"Together we pray for an end to terrorism that falsely claims to advance Islam and seeks to subjugate our land to the brutal ISIS (Daesh)," Abella said in a statement.

"In this spirit of Muslim peace, the president has offered the hand of peaceful dialogue to terrorist groups, to avoid bloodshed in this time of prayer, fasting and mercy."

Trump Family Further Mired in Scandal



U.S. President Donald Trump arrives for a family photo at the G7 Summit expanded session in Taormina, Sicily, Italy May 27, 2017.

WASHINGTON (AFP) -- President Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, made a pre-inauguration proposal to the Russian ambassador to set up a secret, bug-proof communications line with the Kremlin, The Washington Post reported.

Kushner, a close adviser to Trump, went so far as to suggest using Russian diplomatic facilities in the United States to protect such a channel from being monitored, The Post said, quoting U.S. officials briefed on intelligence reports. The revelation is yet another sensational element in the deluge of allegations raising questions about the Trump team's relationship with the Russians, who U.S. intelligence agencies say tried to sway the November election in Trump's favor and thus deny Hillary Clinton the presidency.

And it ensures that Trump will be thrust back into the din of the Russia scandal upon his return to Washington this weekend following his first foreign trip, a tour of the Middle East and Europe.

The Washington Post said the secret communications proposal was made December 1 or 2 at Trump Tower in New York, according to intercepts of Russian communications that were reviewed by U.S. officials.

Michael Flynn, who would become Trump's national security adviser before being fired 24 days into the job for not telling the truth about meetings he held with the

Russian ambassador, was also at the meeting, The Post reported.

The Russian ambassador, Sergei Kislyak, was surprised by Kushner's idea of the secret channel and passed it on to the Kremlin, the Post said. It did not specify what came of Kushner's alleged pitch, if anything.

The White House did not immediately comment on the report.

Jim Himes, a Connecticut Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, told MSNBC, that not disclosing such contacts "raises a lot of questions." "If it's true that somebody did ask for some kind of private line, some kind of mode of communication that was secure, that was unusual, boy does that raise a whole bunch of questions." Besides the Kushner developments, which strike at Trump's core by drawing his family into the crisis, the White House also faces a cascade of other worries in the coming week.

The Senate Intelligence Committee has "asked President Trump's political organization to gather and produce all Russia-related documents, emails and phone records going back to his campaign's launch in June 2015," The Post reported. There was no immediate White House reaction. Fired former FBI director James Comey has promised to testify at an open session before the Senate Intelligence Committee, sometime after Monday's Memorial Day holiday.

News in Brief

AGALAWATTE, Sri Lanka (AP) -- Sri Lanka has appealed for outside help as the death toll from floods and mudslides Saturday rose to 100 with 99 others missing.

The Disaster Management Center said more than 2,900 people have been displaced. The military used large armored vehicles and boats to transport people to safety. But some remained trapped in interior villages where boats have been unable to reach. The Sri Lankan government appealed to the UN and other countries for help with rescue and relief measures.

RABAT (Dispatches) -- Clashes erupted in a northern Moroccan city after authorities sought to arrest a well-known activist who has led recent anti-government demonstrations and who interrupted a Friday prayer sermon, activists and local residents said.

Political protests are rare in Morocco, but tensions in Al-Hoceima city have been simmering since October 2016 after the death of a fishmonger who was crushed inside a garbage truck while trying to retrieve fish confiscated by the police. His death sparked outrage against "Hogra," a colloquial Derja Arabic term for deprivation of dignity because of official abuses or corruption, and prompted some of the largest protests since Arab Spring-inspired demonstrations in 2011.

SRINIGAR, India (Dispatches) -- Six suspected militants were killed Saturday in Indian-administered Kashmir along the heavily militarized border that divides the disputed territory with Pakistan, the Indian army said.

Indian army spokesman Colonel Rajesh Kalia said the armed militants had snuck into the Indian side from across the line of control -- the de-facto border between the two countries -- when soldiers intercepted them, triggering a gunfight.

KATHMANDU (AFP) -- A cargo plane crashed Saturday as it was trying to land at a small airport near Mount Everest, seriously injuring the two pilots and hostess on board, officials said.

All three crew members were pulled alive from the wreckage of the plane, which broke into three pieces when it crashed as it was attempting to land at Lukla airport in heavy fog. Local media reported that the three crew members were in a serious condition.

THE HAGUE (AFP) -- At least three of 19 people who were allegedly fathered by a now-deceased Dutch doctor through IVF treatment came from a different sperm bank than one until now named in reports, a Dutch newspaper said Saturday.

In a widening scandal, Dutch daily tabloid Algemeen Dagblad said a DNA comparison between a legitimate child of doctor Jan Karbaat and three of 19 children suspected to have been sired by him through IVF treatment, came from Rotterdam's Zuider hospital. Until now, Karbaat -- who died last month -- is suspected of using his own sperm to inseminate women instead of that of a chosen donor at a different fertility clinic in the town of Barendrecht just outside Europe's largest port city.