

BELGIAN TRANSPORTATION MINISTER RESIGNS AMID CRITICISM ABOUT AIRPORT SECURITY

News / Personalities



Belgium's transportation minister resigned Friday in the wake of revelations that she failed to act on a secret report that had warned of inadequate security measures at Brussels Airport a year before last month's suicide bombings there.

The report, prepared by European Union airport security inspectors last April, found serious deficiencies in the way surveillance, passenger and luggage screening and other safety checks were conducted at airports across Belgium.

Belgium opposition parties leaked it to the media this week, intensifying criticism that the country has done too little to prevent terrorism.

The transportation minister, Jacqueline Galant, at first said she had not seen the report and claimed she was being made a victim of a "media crusade."

But at a news conference Friday, Prime Minister Charles Michel contradicted her.

"A summary of the report had been discussed and sent to the minister's Cabinet in June 2015," he said. "I cannot accept that Parliament was not made aware of this important point yesterday." He announced Galant's resignation at the same news conference.

A total of 16 people died on March 22 at the airport, where Islamic State militants detonated two bombs in a departure area. In a coordinated attack, another suicide bomber struck a Brussels subway station shortly afterward during morning rush hour, killing another 16.

The political fallout was immediate.

One key suspect, Mohamed Abrini, had been on wanted lists since the November attack in Paris and was living in Belgium, forcing authorities to explain why he had not been detained.

The interior and justice ministers offered to resign, but the prime minister asked them to stay on.

At the news conference, he said his government was determined to learn from its mistakes: “The security of all Belgians is a priority for this government.”

Parliament is now investigating security shortcomings.

The bombings, coming after the Paris attack that killed 130 people, have put all of Europe on high alert.

In Britain on Friday, police in Birmingham arrested three men — ages 26, 40 and 59 — and a 29-year-old woman who security sources said were connected to both attacks. Another suspect, a 26-year-old man, was arrested at London’s Gatwick Airport.

Authorities said the suspects were being questioned by counter-terrorism detectives.

British media also reported that Abrini had been in Birmingham last year and took pictures of a soccer stadium.

He was arrested last week near Brussels, where authorities said he confessed to being the mysterious “man in the hat” who could be seen in surveillance footage walking with the two suicide bombers shortly before the explosions.

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