

International

Jewish museum terror attack court case opens in Brussels

First Syria jihad veteran to stage a terror attack in Europe

BRUSSELS: The trial opened yesterday of a “very polite” Frenchman accused of shooting four people dead at a Jewish museum in Brussels, allegedly the first Syria jihad veteran to stage a terror attack in Europe. Mehdi Nemmouche, 33, who was in court, faces a life sentence if convicted of the killings in the Belgian capital on May 24, 2014, following his return from Syria’s battlefields.

Both Nemmouche and Nacer Bendrer, a fellow Frenchman aged 30 who allegedly supplied the weapons, were due to hear the 200-page charge sheet against them in the first two days of the trial being held in a Brussels criminal court under heavy security. Accompanied by two police officers in balaclavas, Nemmouche sat down in the dock wearing an orange sweater. He gave his name at the judge’s request.

Bendrer, who could also be jailed for life if convicted, sat about two meters from him dressed in a black sweater, accompanied by a female police officer whose face was visible. Both have previously denied charges of “terrorist murder” for the anti-Semitic 82-second shooting spree. More than 100 witnesses were due to testify at the trial which is being attended by the victims’ families and Jewish community leaders.

Firing a pistol and then an assault rifle, the gunman killed two Israeli tourists, a French volunteer and a Belgian receptionist at the Jewish Museum. Six days after the attack Nemmouche — born to a family of Algerian origin in the northern French town of Roubaix — was arrested in the southern French port city of Mar-

seille, where he arrived on a bus from Brussels. Investigators say he was carrying a handgun and an assault rifle used in the shooting. They say he fought with a jihadist faction in Syria from 2013 to 2014, where he met Najim Laachraoui, a member of the gang which went on to carry out suicide bombings in Brussels that killed 32 people in March 2016.

Nemmouche ‘relaxed, calm’

Justice minister Koen Geens told RTL broadcaster that the Nemmouche trial is a good test case for the Brussels bombing trial where jurors will have to weigh evidence with the risk “of being intimidated.” The same Brussels cell is also alleged to have coordinated and sent jihadists to carry out the Paris gun attacks and bombings on November 13, 2015, in which 130 people were killed and hundreds more wounded.

Both attacks were claimed by the Islamic State (IS) group, whose activities in Syria and Iraq lured thousands of jihadists from Europe. Nemmouche and Bendrer, investigators say, met nearly a decade ago while in prison in southern France, where they were both described as “radicalized” inmates who tried to win others over. Bendrer was arrested in Marseille seven months after the Jewish Museum attack and charged as Nemmouche’s accomplice.

Although he was jailed for five years in September by a French court for attempted extortion, he was transferred to Belgium for the trial. Nemmouche is expected to face a separate trial in France for holding French journalists hostage in Syria. The former hostages are expected to

testify about Nemmouche’s character during the Brussels trial, despite the defense arguing that theirs is a separate case. “When I hear his lawyers say he is someone who can be very polite, very urbane, sure. He is a clever one,” former hostage Didier Francois told Europe 1 radio. “But, as for me, I will never forget his capacity for violence,” the journalist said. Nemmouche lawyer Henri Laquay told journalists yesterday that his client was “relaxed, calm,” adding: “He will choose the moment when to speak.” More than 300 Belgian and foreign journalists have registered to cover the museum attack trial which could last until the end of February. — AFP



BRUSSELS: Weapons are displayed as pieces of evidences ahead of the opening session of the trial regarding the terrorist attack at the Jewish Museum. — AFP

C Africa army head came to Russia for training: Minister

MOSCOW: The defense minister of the Central African Republic said in an interview published yesterday that the chief-of-staff of the conflict-riven nation’s army had been in Russia for training. Russia’s influence in CAR has been growing since 2017, when the UN-backed government there called for help to fight militias rampaging through the country.

Moscow has already supplied weapons, military officers, at least 170 military “trainers” and a security adviser to work with President Faustin-Archange Touadera. “As of this month, 1,300 of our army’s soldiers have been instructed and trained” at a Russian facility in CAR, minister Marie Noelle Koyara told Russia’s RIA Novosti news agency. “Our head of the general staff has himself been for training in Russia,” she added, without providing further details.

Since Russia-trained soldiers have been deployed in the country, “the situation has not only stabilized, but visibly improved,” she said. The defense minister said that at the Russian centre at the

former presidential palace in Berengo west of Bangui which opened last year, soldiers were instructed in how “to become a real military force”.

“If necessary, this centre in Berengo can be expanded because it has already proven its effectiveness as a training platform,” she said in remarks translated into Russian. The African nation is historically linked to France and already has EU and UN aid, but Koyara insisted Moscow and Paris were acting as partners rather than rivals in the region. Rival militias have been battling each other since the 2013 overthrow of longtime leader Francois Bozize, a Christian, by majority-Muslim militias in a coalition called the Seleka. A UN arms embargo imposed that year was in 2017 lifted exclusively for Moscow. Most of the country’s territory remains in the hands of armed groups despite Touadera’s election in 2016.

Violence has claimed thousands of lives, and hundreds of thousands of people have been internally displaced or fled abroad. The military trainers sent by Russia are mercenaries with close ties to Russian mining companies and the numbers deployed could be significantly higher than officially reported, according to reports in Russian and Western media. Last year three Russian journalists who were investigating the shadowy Russian “Wagner” mercenary group were ambushed and murdered in CAR. — AFP

Nepali woman, two kids, die in ‘menstruation hut’

KATHMANDU: A Nepali mother and her two children have died of suspected smoke inhalation after a night in a windowless hut where women are banished during their period, police said Wednesday. Many communities in Nepal consider menstruating women as impure and force mothers and daughters to stay in sheds away from the family home once a month, despite the practice being outlawed.

Police said Amba Bohara, 35, fell asleep in a hut in western Bajura district on Tuesday evening with her two sons aged 12 and nine. The trio had huddled around a fire to stay warm in Nepal’s freezing winter conditions. Local police chief Uddhab Singh Bhat told AFP the woman’s mother-in-law opened the hut the next day to find all three dead. “We are waiting for the results of a postmortem to confirm the cause of death, but believe they died of

suffocation,” Bhat told AFP. “We are investigating.”

Parts of the blankets sheltering the trio were burned, and Bohara had suffered burns to her legs. The ancient shunning practice known as “chhaupadi” was outlawed in 2005 but is still enforced in parts of Nepal, particularly its remote and conservative western regions. Last year, Kathmandu introduced three-months jail and a 3,000 rupee (\$30) fine for anyone caught imposing chhaupadi.

The practice is linked to Hinduism and considers women untouchable during menstruation and after childbirth. Under Chhaupadi, women are barred from touching food, religious icons, cattle and men during their period and must sleep away from others. The death of Bohara and her children are not the first linked to the practice. Last year, a 21-year-old woman succumbed to smoke inhalation while banished to a hut, and other women have died from snake bites in the past. The country’s National Human Rights Commission said police needed to do more to enforce the law. “Women will continue to die unless there are consequences for enforcing this tradition,” said the commission’s Mohna Ansari. — AFP