

# Use of French terrorism law on railroad saboteurs draws criticism

By Celestine Bohlen  
Published: Tuesday, November 4, 2008

**PARIS** — The French police last month swooped down on the village of Tarnac with helicopters and dogs and dragged several young people out of bed.

By Nov. 15, the police had arrested nine people, including five living in a farmhouse on a hill overlooking Tarnac, and accused them of associating with "a terrorist enterprise." Their alleged crime: Causing massive train delays by draping horseshoe-shaped iron bars over 25,000-volt power lines on four separate tracks, disabling 160 trains.

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The charges have reignited debate over a 1996 anti-terrorism law long criticized in France and elsewhere as overly broad. On Wednesday, the Liberation newspaper's banner headline about the case was: "Terrorists, Really?" Last week, raucous demonstrators went to a Paris courthouse to demand the release of five suspects. Three were freed Dec. 2, four were let go earlier and two remain in custody, all pending further investigation.

"To go from sabotage to terrorism is a gigantic qualitative leap," said Michel Gillibert, a 27-year-old stonecutter who heads a support group for the suspects. "We're looking at 20 years in prison for causing train delays."

The sabotage stranded about 40,000 travelers for up to six hours on Nov. 8, but no one was hurt and there was no risk of derailment, said Jean-Paul Boulet, a spokesman for Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français, or SNCF, the national rail company.

Opponents of the law claim it could become a cudgel to intimidate nonviolent protesters, especially as France teeters on the brink of recession, making the social fabric more fragile.

"There is a temptation during a time of crisis to consider any illegal manifestation of political expression to be of a terrorist nature," Gilbert Thiel, a member of France's team of anti-terrorist magistrates, said in an interview.

Under French law, magistrates decide what charges, if any, to take to trial. Thiel said a decision on whether to use the police's initial terrorist-law charges was months away.

The French terrorism law was criticized in a July report by Human Rights Watch, an organization in New York. The report said the law requires a "low standard of proof" to arrest suspects only tangentially associated with any terrorist groups.

Government officials say the suspects are dangerous. Interior Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie described them on Nov. 11 as "ultra-leftists" who share a "total rejection of any democratic expression of political opinion, and an extremely violent tone."

The suspects are mostly graduate students from middle-class families, aged 22 to 34. One of the two suspects still in custody, Julien Coupat, 34, is being charged with "directing a terrorist group," said Isabelle Montagne, a spokeswoman for the Paris Prosecutor's office.

She said the police believed he was the anonymous author of a 2007 book entitled "The Coming Insurrection," which mixes an anarchist political philosophy with instructions on disrupting state symbols, like railroads.

The book's implicit threats prompted the police to begin monitoring Coupat's group in mid-2007, said Xavier Raufer, a professor of the Institute of Criminology in Paris.

Montagne said various objects, such as heavy cable cutters, climbing gear, screw cutters and leftist literature were found in the searches of the farmhouse at Tarnac.

The police said the nine suspects sabotaged the high-speed rail lines on the night of Nov. 7, just before the long Armistice Day weekend.

"To take on the railroads, particularly on a holiday weekend, is a sure way to impress public opinion," Guillaume Pepy, the head of SNCF, said in an interview with the French newspaper *Le Parisien*.

Boulet, the SNCF spokesman, said the French railroads, with two million passengers a day, had never been targeted in such a systematic way.

The last time France dealt with home-grown anarchists, they were of a more violent variety. In the 1970s and 1980s, Action Directe - the French version of the Baader-Meinhof group in Germany or the Red Brigades in Italy - carried out commando-type actions, including bank robberies and assassinations.

Jean-Yves Camus, an expert on extremist groups at the Institute of International and Strategic Relations, in Paris, said the authorities' concerns about the train saboteurs was understandable.

"When a group of people goes from theorizing about violence against state institutions to taking action, that is the moment for the police to do something," Camus said. The police reaction "was designed to be dissuasive."

Thiel, the magistrate, said today's economic climate could give rise to potentially violent fringe groups. "The more tensions there are in society, and God knows we are in a period of economic and financial crisis which only makes inequalities all the more obvious, it is certain that some young people will be easily manipulated," he said.

In Tarnac, where a 160-year-old oak in the main square is named "Liberty Tree," residents are aghast at the use of the terrorism law in this case. "Guilty, not guilty, that's not the issue," said Manu, 28, a forest worker who declined to give his last name because he did not want to be associated with the case. "The problem is the word terrorism."