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Authorities deny Paris Metro was targeted by Madrid terror suspect

By Associated Press
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ROME - Italian and French authorities denied Thursday that a terror suspect arrested in Milan and believed to be a key figure behind the Madrid train bombings was planning an attack on the Paris subway.

Authorities have said that Rabei Osman Ahmed was planning an attack, but gave no details. Italian news reports have indicated Paris Metro as the target.

The reports said Osman Ahmed was recorded asking about the Paris subway and its security. Italian dailies Corriere della Sera and La Repubblica cited what they said were transcripts of telephone conversations in which Osman Ahmed appeared to organize logistics for another suspect who was on his way to the French capital.

``We categorically deny the reports,'' said a joint statement issued by the Milan prosecutors leading the probe, Maurizio Romanelli and Armando Spataro, and referring to the alleged Paris plot.

The prosecutors also denied all other reports ``concerning the identification of any other specific target'' - a reference to reports pointing to a NATO base in Belgium and to a chemical attack in the United States.

In Paris, police said an analysis of intelligence from Italy following Osman Ahmed's arrest shows that no attack on Paris Metro was being prepared.

They also noted that the French terror alert security level has gone down a notch since the close of D-Day ceremonies, which means that ``there is not currently a direct threat to our country and to Paris in particular.''

Osman Ahmed, a 33-year-old Egyptian, was arrested Monday night in Milan. Authorities have described him as one of the organizers of the March 11 attacks in Madrid that killed 190 people and injured more than 2,000. The bombings have been blamed on Islamic extremists with possible links to al-Qaida.

On Thursday, a judge questioned Osman Ahmed for the first time since the arrest, but he refused to answer questions, according to his lawyer, Viviana Bossi. Also questioned was a suspect picked up with him, a 21-year-old Palestinian identified as Yahia Payumi, who denied any wrongdoing, said lawyer Sandro Clementi.

The judge upheld the suspects' arrest, and prosecutors were scheduled to question them Friday. The suspects are accused of association for international terrorism, a charge that was introduced in Italy after the Sept. 11 attacks.

The arrests in Milan were part of a coordinated action in Europe that also brought in 15 people in Belgium. Some of the suspects picked up in Belgium were believed to have taken orders from Osman Ahmed.

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