

# French official 'smuggled arms from Gaza'

## Jerusalem

A French consulate worker faced charges yesterday of using an official car to smuggle dozens of guns from the Gaza Strip to the occupied West Bank in a case Israeli authorities called "very severe".

Israeli officials were quick to note that the worker from France's Jerusalem consulate acted on his own without his superiors' knowledge and that diplomatic relations between the two countries were not affected.

But the delicate case comes ahead of a planned

visit next week to Israel and the Palestinian territories by French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and French diplomats are sure to face questions over it.

The arrested French citizen and several Palestinian suspects are accused of belonging to a gun-running network that eventually sold the weapons to arms dealers, Israel's Shin Bet domestic security agency said in a statement.

It alleged that Romain Franck, 23, had taken advantage of reduced security checks for consular vehicles to

transport the weapons out of the Palestinian enclave.

The Shin Bet said he was motivated by money.

"The consulate employee smuggled the arms on a number of occasions in recent months while using the French consulate's consular car, which underwent a more lax security inspection at the border crossing, as is the case with this type of car," the statement said.

"The consulate employee transferred arms on five occasions, during which he transferred some 70 pistols and two automatic rifles."

A total of nine suspects have been arrested and six were to be charged in court later yesterday, including Franck.

Those arrested also include a resident of east Jerusalem who works as a security guard at the French consulate, the Shin Bet said.

The statement said the French consulate employee received the guns from a Palestinian in Gaza who worked at the French cultural centre in the strip.

He then smuggled them into the West Bank to another person who sold them on to arms dealers, it said.

Gaza, run by Islamist group Hamas, has been under an Israeli blockade for over a decade but weapons have been smuggled in through tunnels from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

News of the February 15 arrest emerged on Sunday, but the details were still unclear.

A spokesman for France's embassy in Israel said Sunday "we take this case very seriously and are in close contact with the Israeli authorities".

Franck "has benefited and continues to enjoy the consular protection" provided to French nationals, he said.

The Shin Bet called the

incident "very severe", saying that "the immunity and privileges given to foreign representatives were cynically abused to smuggle weapons that could be used for terror attacks against Israeli civilians and security forces".

"The investigation was conducted in cooperation with the Israeli foreign ministry while constantly updating the French authorities," it said.

An Israeli official said on condition of anonymity that while authorities were taking the case "very seriously," diplomatic relations were not affected. (AFP)

Vehicles in the Gaza Strip move towards the Israeli-controlled Erez crossing

## Abbas says Hamas 'behind' bomb attack on Palestinian premier

### Ramallah, Palestinian Territories

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas directly accused Hamas yesterday of carrying out a bomb attack against prime minister Rami Hamdallah in Gaza last week, threatening fresh sanctions against them.

Abbas had previously said the Islamist group was responsible as it controls security in the Palestinian enclave, but yesterday evening said they were "behind the attack."

Hamdallah was uninjured in the March 13 attack, which saw a roadside bomb explode as his convoy entered Gaza in what Palestinian officials have called an assassination attempt.

Six of his security guards were lightly hurt.

Speaking to Palestinian leaders in the West Bank city of Ramallah, Abbas said if the attack had succeeded it would have "opened the way for a bloody civil war."

He said the incident would "not be allowed to pass" and announced he would take unspecified "national, legal and financial measures." (AFP)

# Assad films himself driving to Ghouta to demonstrate victory

## Beirut

President Bashar al-Assad flaunted government advances in Syria's seven-year war by filming himself driving to meet frontline soldiers near Damascus, making a video of

the journey from the city centre into areas recently recaptured.

"The road is open... everything is running now in the city and in Syria," he said in the video, describing a road that had been cut by sniper fire

and saying it was now easier to travel around the country.

The video, released overnight after a trip on Sunday, showed Assad in sunglasses at the wheel of his Honda car, speaking about the government's increasing strength as peaceful scenery behind him gave way to battle-scarred concrete.

His visit to the battle front in eastern Ghouta, where state television showed him cheered by soldiers as smoke rose in the distance, came after tens of thousands of civilians began fleeing the opposition area for government lines.

The army offensive began

a month ago with a massive bombardment and has so far retaken most of the area, the biggest rebel enclave near Damascus, cutting it into three zones.

It is the latest in a series of military gains for Assad after Russia entered the war on his side in 2015, ending rebel hopes of toppling him by force. Large areas remain outside his grip, but he now controls the main cities of Syria's heavily-populated west.

### In Control

"This is the picture he wants to give... he is in control and finishing off the opposition in

eastern Ghouta," said Nikolaos Van Dam, a former diplomat in Syria and author of two books on the country.

While Assad has increasingly been shown travelling around Syria in recent years, it is unusual for him to visit areas close to the battlefield, as he did on Sunday, meeting cheering soldiers as well as civilians who had escaped the fighting.

There have been numerous other signs of his increasing confidence, including the release last year of a banknote bearing his image for the first time since he became president in 2000. (Reuters)



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad walks with Syrian army soldiers in eastern Ghouta, Syria

## Four killed in bomb attack near Afghan political rally

### Jalalabad, Afghanistan

A bomb on a motorcycle exploded near a political rally in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, killing at least four people and wounding 10 others, officials said.

The blast happened as supporters of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a notorious warlord and former prime minister, were leaving the rally at a football stadium in Jalalabad, the capital of

Nangarhar province.

Hekmatyar, who returned to public life last year after signing a controversial peace deal with the Afghan government, was at the gathering but it was not clear if he or his supporters were the target of the attack.

Provincial governor's spokesman Attaullah Khogyani said four people had been confirmed dead and 10 wounded including two children.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the blast. Areas of restive Nangarhar, which borders Pakistan, are a stronghold for the Islamic State group but Taliban fighters are also active.

It was the latest deadly violence to strike war-torn Afghanistan as militant groups step up attacks and US and Afghan forces intensify air strikes and ground offensives. (AFP)



A damaged minibus is seen after a blast in Jalalabad, Afghanistan