Spain church machete attack suspect was 25-year-old Moroccan, police confirm

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The suspect in a machete attack on two churches in southern Spain in which one clergyman was killed and another seriously injured is a 25-year-old Moroccan man who was due to be deported from the country, police said on Thursday.

The suspect was arrested on Wednesday evening after a man wielding a machete attacked several people at the churches of San Isidro and Nuestra Senora de La Palma, around 300 metres (1,000 feet) apart, in the southern port city of Algeciras.

Police said they took the suspect to his home overnight for detectives to conduct a search, a spokesman for Spain's National Police said.

He is expected to be transferred to the Spanish capital Madrid later on Thursday to appear before a High Court judge on terrorism charges at a time to be confirmed, police and court spokespeople said.

A police source denied local media reports that the suspect had been under surveillance by security operatives in the days or months before the attack.

He had no criminal nor terrorism-related convictions either in Spain or other allied countries, the source said, declining to be identified due to the sensitivity of the case.

The man was not in Spain legally and his deportation process began in June last year and was ongoing, the source added.

Diego Valencia, a sacristan at the Nuestra Senora de La Palma church, was killed after the assailant chased him out of the church and attacked him in the busy square outside, police and church groups said.

A second man, the priest of the parish church of San Isidro, Antonio Rodriguez, was operated on last night for serious knife wounds and is said to be in a stable condition, the city's mayor told local television.

Local media said three others were injured, though police did not confirm.

Mayor José Antonio Landaluce said the attacker's knife narrowly missed the priest's spinal cord. "He lost a lot of blood, the stretcher was soaked with blood but if everything goes well he could be discharged today at the end of the day," he told TVE.

An official day of mourning has been declared by the city's mayor who will host a gathering at midday on Thursday outside the church where Valencia died.

Spain's Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska, who will travel to the city on Thursday, said the search of the suspect's home will help police determine whether terrorism was at play.

"There were no third persons involved in what happened," he said.

Mayor José Antonio Landaluce has also called on the Interior Ministry for an increase in security for the city, according to an interview with COPE radio.

The port of Algeciras in the Andalucia region serves as the main entry point for Moroccans arriving in Spain.

Spain suffered the worst Islamist militant attack on record in Europe in 2004, when 192 people were killed and more than 1,800 injured in multiple bombings on Madrid's train system.

According to a High Court ruling, the perpetrators were linked to Al Qaeda and the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group.

In 2017, 16 people were killed and nearly 200 injured in a series of attacks that included Islamist militants in a van mowing down pedestrians on Barcelona's iconic Las Ramblas boulevard.