

SEPTEMBER 19, 2016, 5:26 AM

LAST UPDATED: TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2016, 10:58 AM

Bombing suspect charged with attempted murder after shootout with cops

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STAFF WRITERS | THE RECORD

With a suspect in custody, it remained unclear Monday whether anyone else may have been involved in two weekend bombings in New York and New Jersey that raised anxiety levels across the region and drew a huge law enforcement response.

Ahmad Khan Rahami, 28, of Elizabeth was shot “multiple times” in a gunbattle with police on a Linden street, during which two officers were injured, authorities said. Hours later, the Union County Prosecutor’s Office charged Rahami with attempted murder related to the shootout.

Authorities said that Rahami, who was born in Afghanistan and was the subject of a large-scale manhunt earlier Monday, “indiscriminately” fired a handgun when a police officer approached him as he slept in the doorway of a bar.

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said Monday that authorities were not looking for additional suspects. However, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said in an interview on CNN that video surveillance showed “people possibly accompanying” Rahami as he walked near two Manhattan sites where bombs were placed — one that detonated and another that did not.

The FBI, meanwhile, said in a news conference earlier Monday that it did not believe Rahami was part of a larger terrorist cell.

Law enforcement identified Rahami as a suspect after lifting a fingerprint from the unexploded pressure-cooker bomb found on 27th Street in Manhattan and observing video from the area. A man resembling Rahami was seen on the video wheeling a suitcase carrying explosive devices to two locations in Manhattan.

Rahami allegedly placed another bomb in a Dumpster on 23rd Street, where it injured 29 people when it exploded Saturday night. All of the victims have since been treated at a hospital and released. Earlier on Saturday, a pipe bomb went off in a trash can along the route of a Marine Corps charity run in Seaside Park in New Jersey. No one was hurt in that explosion.

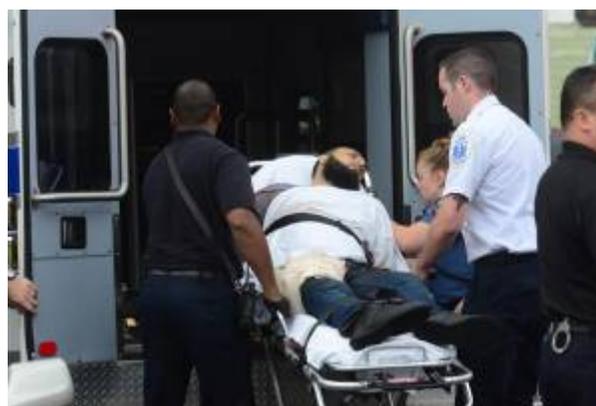
On Sunday night, a package containing “multiple improvised explosive devices” was discovered in a trash can near an Elizabeth train station not far from where Rahami lived, the FBI said. One of those devices detonated while law enforcement officials were working to secure it with a robot, but no one was injured, the FBI said.

Elizabeth’s mayor, J. Christian Bollwage, said Monday that the devices had been discovered by two men who reported seeing wires and a pipe coming out of the package. There were no timers or cellphones found with the bombs, Bollwage said, leading investigators to believe they had been discarded quickly.

“The speculation is that someone was disposing of evidence because law enforcement, we believe, was getting close,” the mayor said.

Bollwage said that investigators were reviewing surveillance footage from nearby businesses and that parts of the bombs had been sent to the FBI lab in Quantico, Va., for analysis.

CNN reported on Monday night that a note that made references to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing turned up near one of the unexploded bombs found by authorities over the weekend.



TARIQ ZEHAWI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ahmad Khan Rahami, 28, is loaded into the ambulance on East Elizabeth Avenue in Linden on Monday.

The Boston attack used pressure-cooker bombs similar to the bombs that authorities said were used in New York.

Authorities said Rahami was found after the owner of a bar called to report a man sleeping in the doorway of his business. A Linden police officer investigated and recognized the man as Rahami from photos distributed by law enforcement, according to police and Linden Mayor Derek Armstead.

Rahami shot the officer — who was wearing a Kevlar vest — in the abdomen, then began firing his gun along East Elizabeth Avenue, police said. The Union County Prosecutor's Office said that another officer suffered a head injury when a bullet fragment struck the windshield of his police cruiser. More officers joined the gunbattle and brought Rahami down, Capt. James Sarnicki said.

The two officers' injuries were not considered life-threatening. "We're very grateful that the Linden police officers that confronted Mr. Rahami are not in critical condition at all," said Union County Prosecutor Grace H. Park.

Rahami was shot in the leg and arm, authorities said, and underwent surgery at the New Jersey Trauma Center of University Hospital in Newark, where security was tight. Hospital visitors were directed away from the entrance, where a cluster of armed Rutgers police officers intercepted pedestrians.

The Union County Prosecutor's Office said on Monday night that it had charged Rahami with five counts of attempted murder and that a judge had set his bail at \$5.2 million.

Rahami, who studied criminal justice at Middlesex County College in Edison between 2010 and 2012, had worked at his family's fried chicken restaurant in Elizabeth.

One neighbor said that he was an automobile enthusiast and had worked as an Uber driver.

His family filed a federal lawsuit against the city years ago alleging that officials were discriminating against them by issuing summonses for violating an ordinance that required businesses to close by 10 p.m. The court papers also alleged that a neighboring business owner made derogatory remarks about the family being Muslim.

Bollwage said that the restaurant "was open all hours of the night," generating a multitude of noise complaints.

The mayor said five people had been questioned by authorities after they were stopped in a vehicle Sunday night near the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge as the manhunt intensified. No charges were filed against them, he said. He declined to say whether authorities believed there were any additional suspects.

"There's a belief that the investigation is continuing and ongoing, and whether there are more suspects at hand or to be discovered remains part of the investigation," Bollwage said.

Bill Sweeney, the head of the FBI's New York office, said he had "no indication there is a cell" operating in the region but said the investigation was ongoing.

The FBI said they were continuing to investigate Rahami's "social network" and Sweeney said the bombs used in both Seaside Park and New York had been linked to Rahami, but did not disclose how authorities made that connection.

Sweeney and New York Police Commissioner James O'Neill said they did not know Rahami's motivation and declined to offer specifics as to



Ahmad Khan Rahami

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TARIQ ZEHAWI/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The FBI on the scene of an apartment in Elizabeth on Monday, Sept. 19, 2016.



AMY NEWMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

how authorities had been able to determine that he was their prime suspect. Rahami was “not on their radar” as a possible terrorist, O’Neill said.

Armed police on East Elizabeth Avenue in Linden Monday, Sept. 19, 2016, shortly after the shootout.

“I’m a lot happier today than I was yesterday,” O’Neill said in an afternoon news conference in New York.

The bombings left people across the region more watchful and jittery, leading to a rash of calls to police Monday about suspicious packages.

Such reports led authorities to temporarily close a parking garage at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, evacuate some homes in Secaucus, call out a bomb-sniffing robot in Clifton, and shut down a corner of Market Street in Paterson, where an unattended suitcase caused 65 members of 10 separate law enforcement agencies to converge on the scene.

In Elizabeth, law enforcement authorities swarmed the area where Rahami lived above his family’s restaurant, First American Fried Chicken, on Elmora Avenue. The FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, K-9 units, city police and the New Jersey State Police were at the scene.

Neighbors said the family had owned the restaurant for years, with several saying they did not know much about them.

Joshua Sanchez, who lives nearby, said family members were “serious” and often kept to themselves. “There was always something weird about those guys,” Sanchez said. “You see this so much on TV ... but you never think it will be a block away.”

Similarly, Joe Fioretti – who served in the Navy in the 1980s – said the family did not interact much with neighbors.

“I’ve seen a lot of stuff in the military, but you don’t expect this in your hometown. ... It’s too close to home,” he said. He said he was thankful that no one had been hurt by the bombs found at the Elizabeth train station.

Also on Monday, the area near the bombing in the Chelsea section of Manhattan appeared to be returning to normal. Residents of Selis Manor, a home for people with visual impairments, said they were venturing out for the first time since an explosion rocked their neighborhood.

“I’m glad they got him, but there are probably others out there,” one of the residents, Ernie Mucci, said of Monday’s arrest.

“All the stress and commotion of the last few days, I’d like it to be over,” said Jeryl Loebner, 71, another resident. “Let’s get back to normal.”

Anyone with information should call the FBI at 800-225-5324.

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