

Police shoot dead Islamic knifemen who murdered priest, 84, after taking hostages in Normandy church

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A PRIEST has died from a slashed throat after two knifemen burst into a church as he celebrated mass, in what appears to be the latest in a string of Islamist terror attacks in France.

The dead man was identified by the Archbishop of Rouen as 84-year-old Father Jacques Hamel, who had been the parish's priest for around 20 years.

Police sources were quoted as saying that at least one of the two hostage-takers was bearded and was wearing a skullcap of the kind worn by some Muslims. The assailants got in through the back door of the church and took the priest, two nuns and two parishioners hostage during morning mass. The men shouted "Daesh" and cut the priest's throat before being "neutralised," police said.

French journalist Anne-Elisabeth Moutet told Sky News the assailants reportedly shouted "Allahu Akbar" on the steps of the building.

A spokesman for the ministry of the interior, Pierre-Henry Brandet, confirmed that the priest was dead and said another hostage was "between life and death". TV footage of the sealed-off crime scene showed one person being stretchered into an ambulance. The other three hostages were brought out alive.

Mr Brandet told French TV channel BFMTV: "The two hostage-takers came out of the church armed and it was at that point that they were neutralised by the police."

In an impromptu press conference at the scene, Mr Brandet said that a careful investigation of the church building was being conducted by anti-terrorist officers, using sniffer dogs to ensure that no bombs had been left behind by the hostage-takers as booby-traps.

The area around the church remained cordoned off and the old town was out of bounds.

French newspaper Le Figaro reported that the church was suspected to have been on a list of Catholic places of worship in the area around Paris drawn up as possible targets by Sid Ahmed Ghlam, an Algerian student arrested last year on suspicion of murdering a mother-of-one during a botched attempt to attack a church in Villejuif. He was sent by Belgian Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who directed a cell which carried out the 13 November attacks in Paris during which 130 people were killed and the 22 March attacks in Brussels that killed 32 people.