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'It seems that he acted alone, and maybe it was a sudden decision'

The Daily Star (04.01.2010) / HRWF (04.01.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - An ax-wielding Somali man with suspected Al-Qaeda links was charged Saturday with two counts of attempted murder after breaking into the home of a Danish artist whose Prophet Mohammad cartoon outraged the Muslim world three years ago. The suspect, who was shot twice by a police officer responding to the scene, was rolled into a Danish court on a stretcher, his face covered. He was ordered held for four weeks on preliminary charges of attempting to murder the cartoonist, as well as the police officer who shot him.

Efforts to protect the artist – 74-year-old Kurt Westergaard – were immediately stepped up, as he was moved to an undisclosed location.

The suspect, described by authorities as a 28-year-old Somali with ties to Al-Qaeda, allegedly broke into the house late Friday armed with an ax and a knife. The house is in Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city, 200 kilometers northwest of Copenhagen.

Jakob Scharf, head of Denmark's PET intelligence agency, said Saturday the man might have attacked spontaneously.

"It seems that he acted alone, and maybe it was a sudden decision," Scharf told Danish broadcaster TV2. He was not immediately available for further comment.

Westergaard, who has been the target of several death threats since depicting the Prophet Mohammad with a bomb-shaped turban, has been under round-the-clock protection by Danish police since February 2008.

When he heard someone trying to break into his home, he pressed an alarm and fled to a specially made safe room.

His five-year-old granddaughter was also in the house at the time.

Officers arrived two minutes later and tried to arrest the assailant. He threatened the officers with the ax, and one officer then shot him in the hand and knee, Preben Nielsen of the Aarhus police said.

Nielsen said the man's wounds were serious but not life-threatening.

Westergaard could not be reached for comment, but he told his employer – the Jyllands-Posten newspaper – that the assailant shouted "Revenge!" and "Blood!" as he tried to enter the bathroom where Westergaard had sought shelter.

"It was scary. It was close – really close," he said, according to the newspaper's website.

The Somali man, whose name cannot be released because of a court order, was accompanied by a lawyer. He arrived at the court in Aarhus from the hospital where he is being treated, and denied the charges.

Danish Prime Minister Lars Loekke Rasmussen called the attack "despicable."

"This is not only an attack on Kurt Westergaard but also an attack on our open society and our democracy," the premier said in a statement.

In 2005, Jyllands-Posten had asked Danish cartoonists to draw Mohammad as a challenge to a perceived self-censorship. Westergaard and 11 other artists did so. Danish and other Western embassies in several Muslim countries were torched in early 2006 by angry protesters who felt the cartoons had profoundly insulted Islam.

Islamic law generally opposes any depiction of the prophet, even favorable, for fear it could lead to idolatry.

Westergaard remains a potential target for extremists nearly five years later: His cartoon is viewed as the most provocative, and he is the only of the 12 cartoonists to live under round-the-clock protection.

In Somalia, Sheikh Ali Mohamud Rage, a spokesman for the Somali group Al-Shabaab, denied the man was member of the group, but supported his alleged attack on the cartoonist. "We welcome the brave action he did," Rage said. "It was a good and brave step taken by that Somali man against the criminal cartoonist – we liked it."

He described Westergaard as "the devil who abused our Prophet Mohammad" and called on "all Somalis in Denmark and around the world to target him and the people like him, too."

Westergaard has received previous death threats and was the subject of an alleged assassination plot. In October, terrorism charges were brought against two Chicago men who allegedly planned to kill him and newspaper's former cultural editor. That trial has not yet begun.

An umbrella group for moderate Muslims in Denmark condemned the Friday attack.

"The Danish Muslim Union strongly distances itself from the attack and any kind of extremism that leads to such acts," the group said in a statement.
