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Third Bomb Attack Directed at France's First Muslim Prefect

By **CRAIG S. SMITH**

NANTES, France, Jan. 29 — A bomb exploded in the mailbox of a school here on Thursday, the third attack in what is apparently a campaign to intimidate a man appointed as the first prefect in France who is both foreign born and Muslim.

The police said that the bomb, which caused little damage, exploded before dawn at a high school attended by the teenage son of Aïssa Dermouche, who earlier this month was named prefect of the Jura department, an administrative region along the Swiss border.

While there is yet no clear evidence that the bombings were politically motivated, their timing and target have caused national alarm.

France is gripped in a tense debate over the role its immigrants should play in its tradition-bound society, and the bombings have raised fears that long-simmering resentment among right-wing nationalists could lead to violence.

Revelations on Thursday that two earlier bombs — one planted in Mr. Dermouche's car and another at the business school he ran until recently — were more sophisticated than first believed have led to speculation that they were the work of a highly motivated individual or group.

"It's not necessarily a professional job, nor is it completely amateur," said an investigative official here. "It's somewhere between the two."

The police have found traces of triacetone triperoxide on the wreckage of Mr. Dermouche's car, which was destroyed in early Jan. 18, just four days after his appointment to his new job was announced.

Triacetone triperoxide, known as TATP, is a dangerously unstable explosive favored by many violent groups because of its ease of manufacture from commonly available ingredients: nail polish remover, acid and bleach.

Its use suggests a well thought out campaign against Mr. Dermouche by one or more persons willing to take significant risks. The substance formed part of the bomb discovered in the shoes of Richard Reid, suspected of being a member of Al Qaeda, while he was aboard a flight from Paris to Miami in 2001.

"It's not just a Molotov cocktail," the investigative official said.

The first bomb was slipped between the windshield and hood of Mr. Dermouche's car. The second bomb, on Sunday, shattered glass doors at Mr. Dermouche's former business school.

The bomb on Thursday was slipped through a letter slot on a wooden door of his son's school building and blew apart an interior mail box. There were no injuries or witnesses in any of the bombings.

The official said investigators were not ruling out any hypothesis about who was behind the attacks. He said that it could turn out to be someone with a personal grudge against Mr. Dermouche and who was angered by his recent appointment.

But the official said that at least five people had called several news and government agencies to claim responsibility for the bombings on behalf of various right-wing, anti-immigration causes.

After the first bombing, the police detained the boyfriend of Mr. Dermouche's former wife because there had been open animosity between the men. But the man was released and the official said the subsequent bombings made it unlikely that he was involved.

Mr. Dermouche, 57, was born to a farming family in a small Algerian village and moved to France when he was 18, part of a wave of Algerian immigrants who arrived in the wake of that country's violent war of independence. He earned a doctorate in social science before obtaining the French equivalent of an M.B.A.

After completing his studies, Mr. Dermouche began teaching at a small but respected business school in Nantes. He became director of the school in 1989 and soon gave the school an international presence by establishing partnerships with dozens of business schools abroad. Mr. Dermouche, who declined to be interviewed for this article, also used the school as a means for connecting with France's power elite, inviting well-known personalities to lecture his students. The institution, now called Nantes' Audencia School of Management, is regarded as one of France's top business schools.

But despite Mr. Dermouche's success, his appointment as prefect in Jura has created a stir because it appeared to many people to be an example of affirmative action, a policy that is technically prohibited in France. He will start his new job the week of Feb. 9.

President Jacques Chirac has insisted that France will not adopt the policy, but the interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, contends that the country's frustrated immigrants need help in winning positions of responsibility.

France attracted tens of thousands of North African immigrants during the economic boom that followed World War II. While immigration was all but stopped in the early 1980's, the country has since been troubled by the social strains of absorbing those immigrants and their French-born children, many of whom are Muslims.

The large presence of North African immigrants, known in France as Maghrebins, has fueled the development of a far-right political movement, whose strong showing in the country's last presidential elections shocked the French establishment.

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