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Christchurch Terror Attack: New Zealand's Multi-Faceted Response

By Nur Diyanah Anwar & Cameron Sumpter

SYNOPSIS

New Zealand's reaction to the mass attacks on two mosques in Christchurch was more complex than portrayed by the media. The overall response has, however, been thorough, constructive and inclusive.

COMMENTARY

NEW ZEALAND experienced the deadliest peacetime attack on civilians in its history on 15 March 2019. Three months after the mass shootings, RSIS undertook a two-week research trip in Wellington, Christchurch and Auckland during the Muslim holy months of Ramadhan and Syawal. Our objective was to understand the processes behind the multi-faceted responses from central and local government, as well as local grassroots organisations and communities.

While questions remain regarding security oversight leading up to the tragedy, the overall response in New Zealand has been thorough, constructive and inclusive. Overwhelming displays of solidarity observed throughout New Zealand society have also mitigated the damage caused by this dark day in the nation's history.

Central Government and Police

When first reports of a fatal shooting at a mosque in Christchurch came through in Wellington, the national security system was activated by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC). Chief executives from relevant government agencies met at the police headquarters forming ODESC (Officials Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination), which coordinated actions into relevant work streams.

One stream concentrated on the assailant, any operational support he may have received, and the management of security measures in the climate of heightened risk. Another focused on the victims, bereaved and impacted communities. Further resources were committed to mental health services, and government agencies coordinated to prevent 'own goals', such as placing tax demands on victims.

The international channel looked at ensuring the security of New Zealand's political and commercial interests abroad. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) worked closely with embassies involved in addressing the needs of victims' families and the injured, expedited visas for their relatives and provided information back to their respective home countries.

A concern shared by many embassies – and families of the victims – was that identification took longer than expected. Grief and anger grew rapidly in the waiting room of Christchurch Hospital, which caused considerable frustration as Muslim rites required bodies to be buried within 24 hours of death. Authorities, however, chose accuracy over haste to avoid misidentification.

New Zealand Police's Māori, Pacific and Ethnic Services quickly assembled a team of 18 Muslim community leaders in Christchurch the day after the attack to help manage religious and ethnic protocols. They drew upon long established relationships within the communities, to communicate effectively and ease tensions.

Local Government

The Christchurch City Council's response was informed by the aftermath of the city's massive 2011 earthquake and months of aftershocks, and the establishment of a multicultural strategy in 2016, which forged strong working relationships with a range of ethnic community associations in the region.

A municipal official said that council authorities quickly evolved into an ad hoc system of "permissionless leadership", whereby practical decisions could be taken to address immediate concerns. Again, partnerships built up over years were seen as invaluable to reaching the right people and avoiding contention.

Schools and Solidarity

Police sent out a call for schools in the vicinity to go into lockdown upon receiving news of the active shooter incident. Coming through at lunchtime, students were scattered throughout their respective grounds and teachers needed to muster them inside.

With curtains drawn and lights out, the atmosphere was tense – particularly as some of the students accessed versions of the assailant's livestreamed video on social media. The lockdown continued for hours, and teachers were forced to think of makeshift solutions for needs such as toilet breaks.

On the following Monday morning, schools held assemblies in which emotional speeches urged unity and tolerance. Students were encouraged to create symbols of

solidarity through arts and crafts. Some of the output was displayed on school grounds; others taken to memorial sites closer to the mosque.

Christchurch Community

Visiting Masjid Al-Noor on Deans Avenue for the first time was moving. Flowers together with messages of love and support still lined the front gates (many were also left at a Rolleston Avenue tribute wall), and visitors were welcome to enter the mosque and visit the main prayer hall.

Inside, the mosque was newly carpeted with rugs sent from the same factory in Saudi Arabia that wove those for the Grand Mosque Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, and its walls were freshly plastered and painted. Prayers were solemn, with the *Imam* breaking down on a number of occasions. In the women's section, a glass pane was still missing from a window, where a plastic sheet hung in its place.

Despite the harrowing ordeal and ongoing trauma, family members of the victims and others present during the attack continue to visit the mosque, which has become a primary source of support and "family" for those who lost loved ones. We were told local police, city officials and government-appointed case managers were regarded as "brothers and sisters" because of their prompt and ongoing assistance.

Social support personnel often joined the community for iftars (breaking of fast) and were on hand after *Jumaah* or Friday prayers, visibly engaging with members of the community, which enhanced levels of trust between the local Muslim community and authorities. Many individuals we met – Muslims and non-Muslims, local Kiwis and foreigners – had volunteered at the support centre at Hagley College, or for the victims' burials.

New Zealand Society's Resilience

Several organisations have shifted their attention to addressing the mental and social well-being within the Muslim community as well. Such initiatives include the Canterbury Resilience Hub which was established after the attacks and provides useful resources on grief, loss, counselling and financial support, as well as helplines for individuals affected by the tragedy.

Other grassroots groups, such as Nawawi Centre, focus primarily on the socio-psychological health of victims' children, by offering access to trained psychologists and organising social activities for youths. These initiatives allow volunteers to regularly check in on those affected, and alert relevant authorities if red flags appear.

Often repeated in our interactions was how the tragic events of 15 March were an attack on New Zealand society as a whole, not just the Muslim community. The incident continues to be a litmus test for New Zealand's unity and fortitude.

However, apparent across all levels of society is a deep-seated trust and good working relations between central and local authorities with the grassroots, as well as between individuals and groups of different faiths. This confidence and solidarity within society

is significant, and illustrates a requisite level of resilience to not only bounce back from this act of terrorism, but potentially bounce forward towards greater strength.

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