

# Sydney siege survivors speak on Australian television

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Survivors of last December's Lindt Café siege in Sydney's Martin Place have criticised the refusal of police and government officials to negotiate with the hostage-taker, Man Haron Monis, during the 16-hour incident.

Interviewed last week on "Inside the Siege: The Untold Story," a Seven Network documentary, and the Nine Network's "60 Minutes," it was the first time any of those held captive had spoken publicly.

The siege began at 9.45 a.m. on December 15 when Monis, a highly unstable individual armed with a shotgun, took control of the café and told frightened hostages that Australia was under attack by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The self-proclaimed Iranian cleric had no connection to ISIS, a fact that was well known to Australian police and spy agencies, which had had frequent dealings with him.

The federal Coalition government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott immediately escalated the incident into a national "terrorist" crisis and, in league with the state government, flooded central Sydney with hundreds of police. The lockdown was accompanied by saturation media coverage, all of which was carefully controlled by the governments and the police.

Monis attempted to make his demands known via the media and social media, but at the request of the police no demands were made known publicly. He offered to release some of his captives if given an ISIS flag, allowed to speak with Abbott on air and news services reported that Australia was under attack from ISIS.

None of these demands was met and no serious negotiations took place, compounding Monis's frustrations and greatly exacerbating the fraught situation inside the café. The siege ended tragically when heavily-armed police commandos stormed the building after Monis killed café manager Tori Johnson.

Police shot Monis dead. Their bullets also killed Sydney barrister Katrina Dawson and wounded three other hostages.

While last week's television documentaries were tightly controlled and no doubt vetted by police and government authorities, siege survivors Marcia Mikhael and Selina Win Pe made a number of damning statements.

Win Pe told "Sixty Minutes" that the hostages "truly felt alone, abandoned; left here to die." She explained that she angrily told the media in one phone call: "I don't think you realise the magnitude of the situation we are in. I hope you sleep well tonight because we are not going to get out of here."

Mikhael, who was wounded by police when they stormed the café, criticised the lack of negotiations. She was told by one police operator during the siege that Prime Minister Abbott was "a very busy man" and could not come to the phone.

"I yelled at him and I just couldn't believe it," Mikhael told the Seven Network. "I said that I don't care what he is doing right now, whether he's walking his dog or he's playing golf with his mates, I'm sure there's nothing more important happening in Australia right now than this, and the lives of the people in this café... It was then that I knew that there was not going to be any negotiation and we were just left there."

The 43-year-old mother of three added: "I'm very angry. Why do I have two legs that don't work now? Why are there two dead people besides the bad guy? I feel like I'm treated like a criminal myself. I can't get my police statement. They won't give it to me. Why am I the criminal?" Mikhael also said the police had played "a waiting game" and that the military should have been used.

While Mikhael's exasperation and anger are

understandable, there was a logic to what took place. It was not that the police were inept or incapable of negotiating, but that a conscious political decision was taken not to negotiate.

Rather than defuse the situation, the Abbott government, backed by the Labor opposition, exploited the siege to create a major “terrorist” scare as a test run of the police-security apparatus, as well as to justify a further raft of anti-democratic, anti-terror laws and Australia’s military involvement in the new US-led war in the Middle East.

The government-police clampdown on the media served to ensure that no information got to the public that would puncture the state of fear and uncertainty. If it had become known that the siege was the work of one deranged individual, not connected to ISIS or Al Qaeda and making limited demands, public opinion could have turned against the government. Questions would have been raised as to what negotiations were taking place and why Monis’s demands could not be met.

New South Wales Deputy Police Commissioner Catherine Burn told a late afternoon press conference on December 15 that the police were using “a very, very well tested system of negotiation” that was “world class.” This was a lie. The latest comments by hostages confirm that no serious negotiations were taking place. (see: “The Sydney siege: Official lies and contradictions”).

The governments and police went to extraordinary lengths to ensure a complete clampdown on news of what was happening. Families of the hostages were contacted by the police and gathered together. In the name of providing them with support, the authorities ensured that they did not speak out. A number of hostages who escaped were immediately led off by police and also said nothing.

At the same time, a decision was made to turn down offers from Muslim leaders to enter the café and defuse the situation. Islamic Friendship Association spokesman Keysar Trad, who knew Monis, told the media following the siege: “If I had known who he was, I could have talked him down into surrendering.”

Since the siege, the police and government authorities have kept a tight lid on all information about the events. If Mikhael felt she was treated as a criminal by the police, it was to prevent any leaking of what could be

embarrassing facts. It was only when the coronial inquest opened briefly on January 29 that any details were officially made public, including the fact that police bullets killed Katrina Dawson and injured three other hostages.

The inquest will undoubtedly provide more details in the course of its hearings, but its central purpose is to cover-up the role of the state and federal governments and the police and intelligence agencies in exploiting the siege and using the hostages as pawns to prosecute their wider political agenda.

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