

Mentally ill man drives vehicle into crowd in Melbourne, Australia

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Just after 4.40 p.m. yesterday, a man drove a SUV into a crowd of pedestrians crossing the road in Melbourne's central business district, at the intersection of the busy Flinders and Elizabeth Streets. Fortunately, no-one lost their life. Nineteen people, however, had to be hospitalised, with at least 12 suffering serious injuries. An elderly man, reported to be in his 80s, is still in a critical condition. A boy aged four has required treatment for head trauma.

The initial response of the police, government authorities and media establishment was muted, compared with previous incidents in Australia and other countries that were immediately labelled acts of "terrorism." It was apparent from the outset that the police had numerous prior interactions with the alleged perpetrator. It soon emerged that he suffered severe mental illness and had a history of addiction to crystal methamphetamine, more commonly known as ice.

In a statement to the media, the state of Victoria's acting police commissioner Shane Patton said: "We haven't found anything at all to indicate his linkage or involvement with any type of extremism with any terrorism organisation or anything of a terrorist nature."

Patton revealed that the individual, later identified as a 32-year-old man who immigrated to Australia in 2004 as a teenage refugee from war-ravaged Afghanistan, was receiving treatment under a state-supported mental health care plan and had missed a scheduled appointment on the day of the incident.

Another man, aged 24, was arrested on the scene on suspicion of being an accomplice, simply because he had filmed the vehicle crashing into people, but was later released without any charges being laid related to the incident.

The horrifying events have inevitably recalled an incident in Melbourne in January 2017, when another

man with a history of mental illness and drug abuse drove a vehicle into crowds of people in the city's Bourke Street. Six people lost their lives and 30 others were injured.

As of writing, police reportedly have not been able to interrogate the driver as he is still in hospital receiving treatment for injuries he sustained. He was also said to be undergoing psychiatric assessment.

However, the authorities may still be seeking to find some way to link the incident to Islamic-inspired terrorism. Acting commissioner Patton used a press conference to imply there was a relationship between the attack and statements the medicated man allegedly made in his hospital bed referring to "voices and dreams" and the "mistreatment of Muslims."

Daniel Andrews, the Labor Party premier of Victoria, without a shred of supporting evidence, labelled the actions of what appears to be a deeply troubled man as an "act of evil." Such statements serve only to fuel the longstanding hysteria against Muslims and the purported threat of Islamic-motivated terrorism that has been stoked in Australia and internationally to justify the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

During a media conference this afternoon, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said he had received "advice" that the incident was the act of a disturbed individual and not terrorism-related. He emphasised, however, that "a mass of material" was being investigated by the security agencies.

"Nothing is being ruled out," Turnbull said. "At this stage police are not satisfied they can describe it as [terrorism]... no terrorism link has been identified at this stage."

Turnbull used the event to justify his government's creation of a security super-ministry.

He claimed that the new Department of Home

Affairs, led by Peter Dutton, helped ensure there was a “seamless” response of all federal agencies working with state police.

Time and again, alleged acts or intended acts of terrorism have been used as the pretext for increasing the size and powers of the police and intelligence agencies, and for sweeping attacks on fundamental democratic rights.

As a result of the most recent batch of “anti-terror” legislation, people suspected of planning “a terrorist act” can be detained without any charges and subjected to police interrogation for up to 14 days—including children as young as 12.

Earlier legislation allows the police to charge people on the accusation that they were contemplating carrying out an unspecified terrorist act, even where there is no evidence that an actual attack was being prepared. Dozens of men, mainly of Muslim background, have been condemned to lengthy prison terms on the basis of such charges.

Statements such as that of Andrews, branding the incident as “an act of evil,” serve only to obscure the more serious issues about the state of society that it poses.

Millions of people in Australia—as around the world—are living under conditions of immense financial and social distress. Compounding the situation, masses of people see no prospect of a solution from within the existing political establishment and the capitalist profit system.

Under these pressures, there has been a steady growth of mental illness of various degrees, as well as alcohol and drug abuse. Each year, tens of thousands of people harm themselves or harm others as a result.

Too little is yet known about the circumstances behind what occurred in Melbourne yesterday to fully place it in its broader social and political context. What can be said, however, is that references to “evil” contribute nothing to an understanding of its causes or how to change the conditions that gave rise to it.



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