

The following is summarised information from a Security Intelligence Report. Where possible, excerpts of the original document have been used. Some details are withheld under section 6(a) of the Official Information Act 1982 as release would prejudice national security. The individual responsible for the Christchurch Mosque attacks is referred to as "the attacker". References to the individual's manifesto have been withheld under section 6(c) of the OIA as the document has been classified as objectionable material by the Chief Censor and therefore release would prejudice the maintenance of the law.

Attacker pleads guilty to Christchurch Mosque Attacks

Report Date: 21 April 2020

Report No: DMS6-15-913

Summary

- On 26 March 2020, an Australian citizen pleaded guilty to 51 counts of murder, 40 counts of attempted murder and one count of engaging in a terrorist act.
- Reporting to date indicates there has been some sense of relief from within the New Zealand Muslim community at the attacker's guilty plea, especially as it has spared victims' families the trauma of a public trial.

Christchurch Mosque Attacks on 15 March 2019

- On 15 March 2019, an Australian citizen shot and killed 51 people and injured many others at the al-Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand. NZSIS assesses the attacker planned and carried out these attacks alone, in support of his idiosyncratic, white nationalist ideology.
- The attacker was charged with 51 counts of murder, 40 counts of attempted murder and one charge under the New Zealand Terrorism Suppression Act. The attacker had pleaded not guilty to all charges, and a trial was scheduled to begin on 2 June 2020.
- On 26 March 2020, the attacker changed his plea to guilty of all charges. The attacker's guilty plea was unexpected, as NZSIS had judged he would welcome the spectacle of an open trial to allow for promotion of his white nationalist ideology.
- In the messages the attacker sent to his mother and sister prior to conducting the Christchurch Mosque attacks, he apologised for the repercussions his actions would have on the family. NZSIS notes there is a realistic possibility that the attacker's experience in prison and further consideration of the possible negative impact coverage of his trial may have on his family led him to change his plea.
- NZSIS notes in February 2020, an Auckland-based individual became the second person to be charged with a terrorism offence in New Zealand. If the attacker is aware of this case, we assess it is possible he pleaded guilty to ensure his notoriety as the first person convicted of a terrorism offence in New Zealand.
- The attacker's sentencing will likely occur towards the middle of 2020, although the sentencing may be delayed due to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reaction to Tarrant's guilty plea

- Open source reporting within the New Zealand Muslim community indicates many are relieved the attacker has pleaded guilty to the murder and terrorist charges.
- The reaction to the guilty plea within online extreme right-wing (XRW) forums has been mixed, with a variety of theories as to what had led to the change. Many users of online forums noted the attacker's change in physical appearance and expressed their belief that the attacker was under some sort of duress or mistreatment whilst in prison, and pleaded guilty to end it.
- NZSIS notes although most of the comments on XRW forums continue to be supportive of the attacker's ideology, many users expressed disappointment in his guilty plea. It is possible that many also may have been looking forward to the opportunity of seeing the attacker justifying the attacks and espousing his ideology throughout his trial.
- Many on the XRW forums have also stated that the attacks did more harm than good to the XRW movement in general. Some feel aggrieved that the attacks have resulted in increased government and NGO attention toward the XRW community. There is also a perception from some that the attacks engendered increased public sympathy for the Muslim community, contrary to the wider XRW objective of raising public suspicion of the 'threat' Muslims and other minority groups pose to society.

NZSIS Comment

- NZSIS assesses it is highly likely the attacker originally pleaded not guilty in 2019 with the intention to use his trial as a platform to promote his extremist ideology and possibly incite violence. NZSIS assesses it is also possible he subsequently realised he would be prevented from doing so given the strict conditions the court would have imposed on any coverage of the trial. It is also possible the inevitable delay of his trial due to COVID-19 considerations played a part in his decision.
- NZSIS assesses that regardless of the attacker's guilty plea, he will likely continue to seek to inspire other XRW individuals, both in New Zealand and overseas from prison. He may also still seek to court public attention and notoriety through his actions in prison.