

Joint Press Conference with the Minister for Justice and AFP Commissioner

23rd December 2016

Joint Press Conference with the Minister for Justice the Hon Michael Keenan MP and the Australian Federal Police Commissioner Andrew Colvin APM OAM

PRIME MINISTER:

I am here with the Minister for Justice, the minister assisting me on counter-terrorism, Michael Keenan, and the Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police, Andrew Colvin, and the Coordinator for Counter-terrorism, Tony Sheehan.

As you know, overnight our police and security agencies have disrupted a very substantial terrorist plot. Overnight the Victorian Police working with the Australian Federal Police and ASIO have arrested seven persons, five of whom are still in custody, searched five premises and are continuing to search them. What they have uncovered is a plot to explode improvised explosive devices in central Melbourne in the area of Federation Square, on or about Christmas Day.

This is one of the most substantial terrorist plots that has been disrupted over the last several years. I want to thank the men and women of the police in Victoria, the Australian Federal Police and ASIO and other agencies, for their work in thwarting this terrorist activity which was an Islamist terrorist plot inspired, as the Victorian Police Commissioner just observed a moment ago, by Daesh or ISIL. It has been a very complex investigation and it speaks volumes for the competence and professionalism of our police and security agencies which are the best in the world.

As you know, the terrorism threat level has been elevated to probable since September 2014. Since that time we've seen four terrorist attacks in Australia and now 12 successful major disruption operations. Fifty seven people have been charged as a result of 25 counterterrorism operations around Australia.

Now this news will be of great concern to all Australians. We are approaching the Christmas season - a time when we come together in peace and love with our families. We congregate in public places for Christmas, for New Year's Eve. It is a time of happiness and joy. These terrorists sought to disrupt it. They have been thwarted. They are in custody. They are no longer a threat to Australia's security.

We see around the world the global threat of terrorism; the truck attack in Berlin earlier this week, and similar attacks, terrorist attacks, in so many other places just in the last few weeks, including Nigeria, Yemen, Turkey, Somalia, Egypt and Jordan. Islamist terrorism is a global challenge that affects us all. But we must not be cowed by the terrorists. We will continue to go about our lives as we always have. What these criminals seek to do is to kill. But they also seek to frighten us, to cow us into abandoning our Australian way of life. They want to frighten Australians. They want to divide Australians. They want us to turn on each other. We will not let them succeed.

Today and overnight our security and police agencies have yet again done their job, their great work of investigation, apprehension. And they will take these criminals to the courts

where they will be dealt with and where the considerably strengthened counter-terrorism laws that the Minister for Justice will speak about in a moment, will ensure that they receive the full judgement of the law, in accordance with the law.

While we have the finest police and security agencies in the world, and while we are able to continue to disrupt terrorist activities, the threat level is probable. So we cannot mitigate all risk. But I can assure all Australians that our police services right across the country - our intelligence agencies right across the country, and around the world - are at the highest state of alert, learning from every incident, whether it occurs here or abroad, putting in place the measures to keep Australians safe. That's what we will always do.

But equally all of us, just as we should defy the terrorists by going about our lives in the normal way, we should also be alert ourselves. And if we see something that is of concern or hear something that is of concern, that could be relevant to national security, to counter-terrorism, we should call the national security hotline - 1800 123 400. Speak up; don't ever be afraid of making a call and letting the police know. Our police and intelligence services keep us safe because citizens keep them informed. It is up to all of us to keep our eyes open.

I want to thank again, the men and women of the AFP, the Victoria Police, and ASIO. I want to thank all the men and women who serve in the Australian Defence Force and in our police and security agencies, our emergency services, keeping us safe every day and every night of the year, but especially at this time of year.

I will now ask the Minister to speak about the way in which the Turnbull Government has changed the law, improved the laws, strengthened the laws to give us and give our agencies a greater capacity to disrupt and deal with the threats to our security.

MINISTER FOR JUSTICE:

Well thank you, Prime Minister. Australia is currently living through the most difficult security environment in our history. Since the middle of 2014, we've had four terror attacks on our soil and the events in Melbourne overnight is the 12th disruption that our agencies have had in the past two and a half years. But this disruption is amongst the most serious in terms of its intent, and in terms of the capability of the people who have been disrupted.

The Government has been very clear-sighted about what is required to keep Australia safe in the face of this terror threat. We have significantly changed the operating environment for our police agencies and our intelligence community to give them extra powers and extra resources that they need to do this job.

The sorts of changes we have made about lowering the arrest threshold, for example, the changes we've made to control orders have been absolutely instrumental in allowing police to disrupt the sorts of activities that we saw in Melbourne and the sorts of activities that we have seen with the other 11 successful disruptions that our police have been able to affect in the past two and a half years.

We've invested \$1.5 billion in the ability of our agencies; that's improved their ability to collect intelligence and it's funded our countering violent extremism efforts overall. We understand that when Australians hear reports of what was planned in the Melbourne CBD that they will be nervous and concerned. But they should also be very reassured that once again, our police, our intelligence community, have been able to work together to stop something from occurring, and in this case, something from imminently occurring. They have been supported 110 per cent by their Government in their ability to do this.

There is literally no better country that is better-placed to deal with the global terror threat than Australia. We are the gold standard for what needs to be done to keep our population safe. I want to congratulate the Australian Federal Police, the Victoria Police and ASIO, who formed the Melbourne Joint Counter Terrorism Team. We thank them very much for everything that they do. Whilst we are celebrating for Christmas and New Year, this is the busiest period for our law enforcement community and our emergency services. But this operation, this successful disruption of what would have been a horrendous attack - an attack that may have caused very significant casualties - is an example of the excellence that they provide to us, and they've been supported to do what they need to do by this Government 110 per cent.

I'll hand over to the commissioner to say a few words as well.

AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE COMMISSIONER, ANDREW COLVIN:

Good morning everybody. Thank you, Prime Minister. Thank you, Minister. You've already heard a fair bit of detail from my Victorian counterpart this morning, but let me just reinforce that this is a significant disruption of what we would describe as an imminent terrorist event in Melbourne, Victoria.

Community safety will always be the number one priority for our law enforcement agencies and we've acted as soon as possible with the best evidence and the best material and the best intelligence available to us to make sure that community safety was being protected.

We do believe, as you've heard, that we have removed this threat in its entirety and we don't believe that this group poses any threat to the Victorian community or more broadly, the Australian community. What this reinforces, of course - as the Prime Minister has said, and the Minister and others - is that law enforcement agencies across Australia, working internationally as well but working with our intelligence and security partners, are doing everything that we can to ensure that at this particular time of the year - as with any time of the year - Australians are safe to go about their business, and to go about enjoying the freedoms that we have here in Australia.

I think it's very important at this time - as you've heard, as well - we want people to be aware of their surroundings. We want people to understand the environment they are in. But we want them to be assured that their safety is paramount to us, that their safety is our number one concern and that they should be very comfortable getting about and doing what they would normally do at this time of year - as I say, as with any time of the year. We are working very hard with the community. We are working very hard across this country. I think this is very good evidence of that work that's been done to date.

As you heard earlier this morning, seven people were arrested. We're anticipating that five of those will be charged a little bit later today, where there'll be material put on the public record, and then the court process will take place. There's not a lot that we can say right now for obvious reasons, but certainly happy to take questions. Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER:

Thank you.

JOURNALIST:

The five people that you're talking about, can you tell us whether or not they were born in Australia, or whether they were radicalised here?

PRIME MINISTER:

Four were born in Australia. One was born in Egypt. We believe they were self-radicalised, so they've been inspired by Daesh or ISIL. That's our intelligence at the present time. Commissioner, do you want to add to that?

AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE COMMISSIONER:

That's right, Prime Minister. Four Australian-born, one born overseas but lived a large part of our life here. There is no question in our mind that they were inspired by events overseas, inspired by ISIL, inspired by material that has been placed online. Beyond that, it's difficult until the investigation progresses a little bit further to figure out exactly what was behind it.

JOURNALIST:

Were they part of a larger group do you think, in terms of people they were talking to or inspired by?

AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE COMMISSIONER:

Well, we believe that we have removed the bulk of this particular cell, this group. Certainly they have associates that we are always interested in, and there is a number of people - and we've said this publicly before - a number of people in this country that we have a remaining security interest in. But in terms of this cell, we believe we've removed the bulk of the cell.

JOURNALIST:

Commissioner, we heard from your Victorian counterpart that they were doing extensive reconnaissance on some of these sites. How sophisticated was this planned attack?

AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE COMMISSIONER:

Well in terms of events that we have seen over the past few years in Australia, this certainly concerns me more than any other event that I've seen. They had moved very quickly from an intention to a capability, and developed capability, including quite progressed plans we will allege.

Now, we've heard about Federation Square, we've heard about the Flinders Street Train Station and St Paul's Cathedral. We believe that they were narrowing down exactly what their plan was, but that's all in one very small part of Melbourne's CBD.

JOURNALIST:

The alleged attack was focusing on Christmas Day. How concerning is that for you? Will there be further security out in the CBD on Christmas, not just in Melbourne, but perhaps cathedrals in Sydney too?

AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE COMMISSIONER:

If I may answer that - and certainly the Prime Minister and the Minister may want to say a few things as well. You've heard from Chief Commissioner Ashton, the public can expect an increased police presence in Victoria. I think we should assume - well I know that we should expect to see an enhanced police presence across the country.

I've spoken to a number of my police commissioner colleagues in the last few days and there's been a range of meetings between senior officials to make sure we're aware of each

other's activities are. Obviously each event around the country is different and requires different security treatment overlay. The police presence will be noticeable, but it won't be intrusive.

Again, I think in this country we've got a long history of being very comfortable with a police presence, we've got a long history of working closely with police, and people should get about doing what they would normally do.

JOURNALIST:

Are any of the landmarks that are at risk that you might be focusing on?

AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE COMMISSIONER:

Well there are the obvious public events over the next week that everyone's aware of. Beyond that, I'm not going to divulge what our security plans are or what our concerns may be, other than to say that we have very well-trying and tested plans in this country. You've heard Chief Commissioner Ashton already talk about the carols, he's talked about the Boxing Day Test, and obviously New Year's Eve is a big focus as well.

Expect to see police. But please, get about doing your business, be assured of your security.

PRIME MINISTER:

You know we are the most successful multicultural society in the world. That's because we have a culture of mutual respect. There is a very small number of people - very small - that seek to disrupt that and do us harm. Among those are the five that are being charged today.

Our ability to disrupt those operations and deal with these criminals, depends upon cooperation, it depends on good intelligence, it depends on a strong sense of community. That's very important.

That's why the work that the AFP and the state police and territory police do with the community, ASIO does with the community, are so absolutely critical. But it's important that we go about our lives and recognise that we have an Australian way of life, for which we stand up.

I came into the city this morning as I often do, on the ferry. Sometimes I get the train, but I got the ferry this morning and I was talking to a visitor who said to me: "You're the Prime Minister." I said, "That's right." He said; "It's amazing that we live in a country where the Prime Minister can get the ferry in to the city, just like everyone else." I said, "Well, that's Australia." And that is Australia. That's what we're standing up for. And we are not going to let these criminals disrupt our way of life.

Thank you very much and have a very happy Christmas.

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