News



Security officers stand guard outside Orthodox Assyrian church in Sydney, Australia, Monday, April 15, 2024. Police in Australia say a man has been arrested after a bishop and churchgoers were stabbed in the church. There are no life-threatening injuries. (AP/Mark Baker)

Mark Baker

View Author Profile

Rod McGuirk

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

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Sydney, Australia — April 16, 2024

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Australian police say a knife attack in Sydney that wounded a bishop and a priest during a church service as horrified worshippers watched online and in person, and sparked a riot was an act of terrorism.

Police arrested a 16-year-old boy Tuesday after the stabbing at Christ the Good Shepherd Church that injured Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel and a priest. Both are expected to survive.

New South Wales Police Commissioner Karen Webb said the suspect's comments pointed to a religious motive for the attack.

"We'll allege there's a degree of premeditation on the basis that this person has traveled to that location, which is not near his residential address, he has traveled with a knife and subsequently the bishop and the priest have been stabbed," Webb said. "They're lucky to be alive."

The teenager was known to police but was not on a terror watch list, Webb said.

The Australian Security Intelligence Organization, the nation's main domestic spy agency, and Australian Federal Police had joined state police in a counter-terrorism task force to investigate who else was potentially involved.

ASIO director-general Mike Burgess said the investigation had yet to uncover any associated threats.

"It does appear to be religiously motivated, but we continue our lines of investigation," Burgess said.

"Our job is to look at individuals connected with the attacker to assure ourselves that there is no-one else in the community with similar intent. At this stage, we have no indications of that," Burgess added.

On ASIO's advice, the risk of a terrorist attack in Australia is rated at "possible." That is the second lowest level after "not expected" on the five-tier National Terrorism Threat Advisory System.

The boy had been convicted in January of a range of offenses including possession of a switchblade knife, being armed with a weapon with an intention to commit an indictable offense, stalking, intimidation and damaging property, Australian Broadcasting Corp. reported.

A Sydney court released him on a good behavior bond, the ABC reported.

The boy had also used a switch blade, which is an illegal weapon in Australia, in Monday's attack, the ABC reported.

Juvenile offenders cannot be publicly identified in New South Wales state.

In response to the attack, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said "there is no place for violence in our community. There's no place for violent extremism."

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The Christ the Good Shepherd Church in suburban Wakeley streams sermons online and worshippers watched as a person in black clothes approached the altar and stabbed the bishop and priest Isaac Royel during a church service Monday evening before the congregation overpowered him, police said.

A crowd of hundreds seeking revenge gathered outside the Orthodox Assyrian church, hurling bricks and bottles, injuring police officers and preventing police from taking the teen outside, officials said.

The teen suspect and at least two police officers were also hospitalized, Acting Assistant Police Commissioner Andrew Holland told journalists.

Paramedics treated 30 patients, with seven taken to hospitals, NSW Ambulance commissioner Dominic Morgan said.

"This was a rapidly evolving situation where the crowds went from 50 to a number of hundreds of people in a very rapid period of time," Morgan said.

"Our paramedics became directly under threat ... and had to retreat into the

church," Morgan added.

The church in a message on social media said the bishop and priest were in stable condition and asked for people's prayers. "It is the bishop's and father's wishes that you also pray for the perpetrator," the statement said.

Holland commended the congregation for subduing the teen before calling police. When asked if the teen's fingers had been severed, he said the hand injuries were "severe."

More than 100 police reinforcements arrived before the teen was taken from the church in the hours-long incident. Several police vehicles were damaged, Holland said.

"A number of houses have been damaged. They've broken into a number of houses to gain weapons to throw at the police. They've thrown weapons and items at the church itself. There were obviously people who wanted to get access to the young person who caused the injuries to the clergy people," he said.

Australians were still in shock after a lone assailant stabbed six people to death in a Sydney shopping mall on Saturday and injured more than a dozen others.

Holland suggested the weekend attack heightened the community's response to the church stabbing.

"Given that there has been incidents in Sydney the last few days with knives involved, obviously there's concerns," he said. "We've asked for everyone to think rationally at this stage. "

The church said in a statement on Tuesday the 53-year-old Iraq-born bishop's condition was "improving."

Emmanuel has a strong social media following and is outspoken on a range of issues. He proselytizes to both Jews and Muslims and is critical of liberal Christian denominations.

He also speaks out on global political issues and laments the plight of Palestinians in Gaza.

The bishop, described in local media as a figure sometimes seen as divisive on issues such as COVID-19 restrictions, was in national news last year with comments about gender.

A video posted in May 2023 by the ABC about a campaign targeting the LGBTQ+ community showed the bishop in a sermon saying that "when a man calls himself a woman, he is neither a man nor a woman, you are not a human, then you are an it. Now, since you are an it, I will not address you as a human anymore because it is not my choosing, it your choosing."