

New Zealand: Christchurch terrorist jailed for life

By Tom Peters
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The fascist gunman responsible for mass shootings at two Christchurch mosques on March 15, 2019, was sentenced yesterday to life in prison with no possibility of parole. Brenton Tarrant had earlier pled guilty to 51 charges of murder, 40 of attempted murder and one charge of committing an act of terrorism.

It is the first time such a sentence has been handed down in New Zealand. Christchurch High Court Judge Cameron Mander said the gunman was motivated by “base hatred of people perceived to be different” and “showed no mercy. You ignored the pleas of the wounded to be spared. You advanced on them, stood over them and shot them.”

A lawyer speaking on Tarrant’s behalf said he did not oppose the sentence. The gunman made no other statement, contrary to some predictions that he would use the hearing to espouse his white supremacist and fascist ideology.

The sentence was delivered after three days of hearings during which 93 people delivered victim impact statements. They included relatives of those killed, as well as survivors of the massacre.

Sara Qasem, whose father Abdelfattah was killed, said: “I no longer feel safe in my own home, in my own country and I [will] always carry this heavy stone in my heart for a tragedy that was one tragedy too many.”

Hamimah Tuyan, who lost her husband Zekeriya, addressed Tarrant, saying: “You put bullets into my husband and he fought death for 48 days, 18 surgeries until his last breath. My eldest son has only five years’ worth of memories with his father. My wee one much less, not enough.”

Tony Green, a spokesman for the Al Noor mosque which was targeted in the attack, told Radio NZ he and others were relieved by the sentence, but added that

“there are some serious questions to be asked” about how the attack could occur.

Ferroze Ditta, general secretary of the Muslim Association of Canterbury, who was injured in the attack, said there were “mixed reactions” to the terrorist’s decision not to speak. Tarrant’s guilty plea means he has not faced any public questioning during a trial about how he was able to carry out the attack, whether he had accomplices, and the source of his fascist motivations.

Ditta, Green and the Islamic Women’s Council have called for the release of an interview conducted with the terrorist by the Royal Commission of Inquiry set up by the Labour Party-led government ostensibly to investigate the attack.

The inquiry, which has been held entirely in secret, is due to release a report on November 26. The government will then decide what information is made public, including about why the police and intelligence agencies did not prevent the attack and whether they had prior knowledge of Tarrant’s activities.

Norwegian journalist Åsne Seierstad, who wrote extensively about the 2011 massacre by Anders Breivik, one of Tarrant’s idols, told Radio NZ on Wednesday: “Tarrant and many of the shooters in America, they have announced their shooting [online] sometimes 24 hours ahead. Where were the authorities then?”

Two days before his attack, Tarrant posted anti-Islamic images on Facebook, including a clear threat against Al Noor mosque (see: “Why was the New Zealand terrorist attack not prevented?”).

In 2016, Tarrant was reported to Australian police for making a death threat on social media, but the complaint was dismissed. The following year the Bruce Rifle Club near Dunedin, where Tarrant practiced

shooting, was reported to New Zealand police by someone alarmed by the racist and violent language used by club members. Again, the complaint was not followed up.

In an extraordinary statement following the sentencing, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern basically demanded an end to public discussion about Tarrant. She told a press conference: “The other job we have is making sure that he has no notoriety, that he has no platform, *and that we have no cause to think about him, to see him or to hear from him again.*” [emphasis added]

In response to Ardern’s earlier requests for the media not to report on the gunman’s ideology, New Zealand’s major media companies had agreed to censor statements made by Tarrant during court proceedings and avoid quoting from his manifesto.

The document was banned by the state censor shortly after the attack, in order to prevent discussion about its contents, including his admiration for US President Donald Trump, and the similarity of his anti-immigrant and anti-socialist views to those of established political parties. These include the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, which is part of the Labour-led coalition government.

The manifesto also notes that far-right extremists frequently join the armed forces. Several members of the fascist group Action Zealania, which shares Tarrant’s views, have served in the NZ military. One unnamed member has been arrested for allegedly sharing restricted military information. It is not known whether the group had any contact with Tarrant, who was known in fascist circles in Australia.

Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, who leads NZ First, declared yesterday that “this terrorist should be returned to the country that raised him,” Australia, to serve his sentence. Such statements are aimed at denying the role New Zealand’s political and media establishment has played in encouraging the anti-Islamic and racist sentiments which influenced Tarrant.

Peters himself has repeatedly smeared Muslims as potential terrorists and has demanded that immigrants made redundant during the pandemic “should go home.” NZ First is leading an anti-Chinese campaign to justify NZ’s integration into US-led war preparations.

Successive governments, led by the Labour and National Parties, sent troops to the illegal US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They poured money into the spy agencies to target the Muslim community in New Zealand and carry out mass surveillance while ignoring the growing danger of white supremacist violence.

Ardern’s government has exploited the terrorist attack to further boost the powers of the state. Through the “Christchurch Call” initiative, she has led a campaign by governments internationally for increased censorship of social media, which Ardern and other governments have blamed for encouraging terrorism (see: “New Zealand government introduces internet censorship legislation”).

The reality is that the extreme right is being fostered internationally, including in the US, Germany, Australia and New Zealand, by governments, media commentators and academics, and protected by state agencies. The aim is to divert rising working-class anger over social inequality away from the capitalist system, onto foreigners and other minorities.

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