

Beat: News

BREAKING NEWS: UPDATE2 -- Gunmen take hostages at Sydney cafe, wave Islamic flag

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USPA News - Gunmen are holding more than a dozen hostages at a cafe in Sydney's main business area, local media reported on Monday, with local television stations airing images of hostages pressed against windows while holding a black flag with Arabic writing. The crisis began just before 10 a.m. local time when at least two gunmen entered the Lindt Chocolate Cafe at Martin Place in Sydney's main business area.

Channel 7, which said its newsroom near the cafe had been evacuated, reported that at least thirteen hostages had been taken, including staff and customers. Images shown by local media organizations showed hostages pressed against windows while holding up a black flag with Islamic writing, saying "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of God." The flag is not specifically associated with the Islamic State (ISIS) group, as was reported on social media. New South Wales (NSW) police confirmed a major police operation was underway in the city's main business area, and said a number of streets as well as Martin Place train station had been shut down. "Police are dealing with an armed incident and specialist officers are attempting to make contact those inside a cafe," the force said in a statement. The area surrounding the chocolate cafe was immediately evacuated after the crisis began, with heavily armed police taking positions nearby. Authorities ordered those in streets bordering Martin Place to remain indoors and away from open windows, and asked others in the area but further away to leave their buildings. "Police urge members of the public to remain calm and note that an appropriate police presence is in place. Police urge the media to be responsible in their reporting. Speculation can cause unnecessary alarm," the statement added, giving no further details about the incident. Sydney's Opera House and several other locations in Sydney were also evacuated as a precaution. Earlier reports that Sydney's airspace had been shut down were rejected by officials, though Qantas said its planes were being diverted around Sydney's main business area due to the incident. "New South Wales Police and the Australian Federal Police are currently responding to a reported hostage-taking in Martin Place in Sydney," Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott said in an emailed statement. "I have spoken with NSW Premier Mike Baird and offered him all possible Commonwealth support and assistance." Abbott, who offered few details about the situation, said the cabinet's National Security Committee had convened for briefings on the situation. "This is obviously a deeply concerning incident but all Australians should be reassured that our law enforcement and security agencies are well trained and equipped and are responding in a thorough and professional manner," the prime minister added. "We will provide regular updates as further information becomes available." The siege began as Australian Federal Police (AFP) scheduled a press conference to announce the arrest of a 25-year-old Beecroft man who has been taken into custody in connection with an alleged plot to carry out a terrorist attack on Australian soil, though it was not immediately clear whether it was linked to Monday's crisis. The press conference was canceled as news of the siege broke.

Article online:

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