

I'm okay mum, can't talk

Mother receives text from son held hostage in Sydney café

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The mother of a hostage – who is currently held inside a café in Sydney by an alleged gunman – received a chilling text message from him hours after the siege started yesterday.

The son, an apprentice plumber, has been held at the Lindt Chocolate Café in the Australian city by the perpetrator who has forced an undisclosed number of hostages to hold a flag to the window similar to that of the Islamic State.

The mother, known as Mel, said on 2GB radio yesterday: "[The text message said:] 'Mum I'm in the Lindt café in Sydney.'"

"My heart stopped, I sent back a text message: 'What is going on? Are you okay.'"

The last contact she had with her son so far was a reply at around 3pm local time saying: "I'm okay mum, can't talk".

An unknown number of hostages have been taken inside the café and five have escaped so far, at least five hours after the siege started. Armed police are surrounding the premises while the frightened hostages ran out through a back door.

The perpetrator has reportedly made contact through the hostages with two Australian television networks and one radio station to make two demands.

The Grand Mufti of Australia, Dr Ibrahim Abu Mohamed, condemned the incident in a statement saying: "The Muslim community have been devastated by the recent news that have been circulated in the media agencies about the reported hostage incident."

The Grand Mufti and the Australian National Imam Council condemn this criminal act unequivocally and reiterate that such actions are denounced in part and in whole in Islam.

GUNMAN TAKES HOSTAGES IN SYDNEY CAFÉ



Clockwise from left: One of the hostages runs towards police from a cafe in the central business district of Sydney yesterday. A female hostage stands by the front entrance of the cafe as she turns the lights off. Presumed hostages hold up a flag with Arabic writing inside the café.



PHOTO: AFP

Imran leads anti-govt protest in Lahore

Supporters of PTI shut down major roads

AGENCIES

Workers from Pakistani cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan's party shut down major roads in the eastern city of Lahore yesterday in the latest round of protests against the government.

Dozens of supporters from Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party gathered at different junctions of the city's major roads and burnt tyres, forcing the suspension of public transport services.

In response, the PML-N leadership has asked party MNAs, MPAs and officer-bearers from Lahore to stop its workers from coming out on roads in order to prevent violent clashes, reports Dawn.

Khan claims the 2013 general election was rigged and wants Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, whose power base lies in Lahore, to resign.

Local and foreign observers, however, have rated the polls as credible, reports AFP.



Rejecting the politics of hooliganism by the activities of PTI, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said "Naya Pakistan" needed display of morality and refined culture.

"What kind of culture the protestors are exhibiting and teaching the new generation," Prime Minister Nawaz said in a brief chat with reporters in Chakwal.

Nawaz said aim of the protestors was to create hurdles in the progress and prosperity of the country.

A heavy police presence is on the streets to try to prevent violence, following clashes at a similar protest in the city of Faisalabad last week.

"A contingent of 15,000 police personnel have been deployed in the city to avoid any untoward incident," senior police official Haider Ashraf told AFP.

Khan has vowed to paralyse major cities around the country as part of his efforts to topple Sharif's government.

Syria loses two key bases to rebels

AFP, Beirut

The Syrian army yesterday lost control of two strategic bases in the northwestern province of Idlib to coordinated assaults by Al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups, a monitoring group said.

Meanwhile, the EU backed UN efforts to arrange a ceasefire in Syria's second city Aleppo yesterday as one of the few good options left in a conflict which has claimed more than 200,000 lives.

EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini said special UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura had briefed foreign ministers Sunday on plans for a "freeze" between government and rebel forces in Aleppo.

The aim is a limited local truce to help ease the desperate plight of the civilian population and provide

some way forward after repeated efforts to end the war have failed.

European Union foreign ministers would look "at what we can do to concretely support the UN... what we can do to stop the war in Syria," Mogherini said as she arrived to chair their regular monthly meeting.

With few other options open, "it is time to contribute positively to a solution," she said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Al-Nusra Front, an Al-Qaeda affiliate, in coordination with Islamist rebels of Jund al-Aqsa and Ahrar al-Sham, seized Hamidiyeh and Wadi al-Deif bases, the biggest regime positions in Idlib.

The Al-Nusra Front initially reported a lightning victory in Wadi al-Deif, putting large swathes of Idlib province, which borders Turkey, under jihadist control.

EU backs UN drive for Aleppo ceasefire

NEWSIN brief

Turkey criticised over media arrests

AFP, Istanbul

The Turkish government yesterday faced accusations of eroding democracy and press freedoms after over two dozen people were arrested in raids against media critical of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The swoon on Sunday chiefly targeted a newspaper and television closely allied to the US-based Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, a longtime close ally of Erdogan who has become his arch enemy.

Vietnam upholds banking tycoon's jail term

AFP, Hanoi

A Vietnamese court yesterday upheld the 30-year jail sentence on a disgraced banking tycoon for his role in a multi-million dollar scandal that shocked the nation's financial markets. Nguyen Duc Kien, 50, was found guilty in June of fraud, tax evasion, illegal trading and "deliberate wrongdoing causing serious consequences".

HK leader declares occupy protest over

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong's Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying declared an end to more than 11 weeks of sit-in protests by pro-democracy demonstrators after police cleared the last remaining camp and arrested a handful of peaceful protesters yesterday.

A committed core of around a dozen demonstrators had staged a sit-in at the centre of the last site in the busy shopping district of Causeway Bay yesterday.



Union members clash with the police outside the N-VA office in Brussels during a national general strike yesterday. The strike follows a series of provincial strikes and was called by the different unions to protest against austerity measures taken by the Michel I Federal Government of Belgium.

PHOTO: AFP

Bush offers his pearls of wisdom

MAIL ONLINE

George W Bush doesn't readily offer political opinions. But when it comes to portraits, he has some broad-brush advice.

"Never paint your wife or your mother."

Bush's new book about his father includes a portrait he painted of his dad, the 41st president.

Bush tells CNN's State of the Union that "I think it's nice," but his tough-to-please mother "kind of wasn't" happy with it.

The 43rd president also painted his wife, Laura. She didn't like it and neither did one of their daughters, "so I just scrapped it".

Well, maybe not. "I may have saved it although they probably think I destroyed it," Bush has said that an essay by Winston Churchill

on painting inspired him to take lessons after leaving office.

Speaking about his artistic process, he told the Today Show: "I was very proud to be standing next to a man I admire greatly."

"First thing I wanted to make sure is I got the noses right. I've tried to paint a gentle soul, and I did it. As for me, I kind of bum-

bled through."

Last year, a hacker leaked his images of animals, landscapes and self portraits, such as him in the bath.

He also reflected on what others think of his work.

"People are surprised," Bush said. "Of course, some people are surprised I can even read."

In March last year, an artist who taught Bush how to paint spoke out his skills as a late-in-life painter.



Russian arms sales soared in 2013

REUTERS, Stockholm

Russian arms makers' sales soared 20 percent in 2013, bucking a slowdown in other countries' industries, largely thanks to a Kremlin push to modernise its military, the SIPRI think tank said yesterday.

Russia's figures were strong enough to slow a three-year decline in global arms sales caused mainly by Washington's withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan and the economic crisis in Europe, SIPRI researcher Siemon Wezeman said.

"The remarkable increases in Russian companies' arms sales in both 2012 and 2013 are in large part due to uninterrupted investments in military procurement by the Russian Government during the 2000's," Wezeman added.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has increased defence spending since coming to power in 2000, seeing rebuilding of the armed forces as a central part of his attempts to restore Russia's position on the world stage.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI's) widely read survey of the world's 100 biggest arms makers, excluding Chinese firms, showed combined turnover down 2 percent to \$402 billion in 2013, slower than the 4 percent decline seen in 2012.

Sales by some of the world's biggest suppliers in the United States and Canada continued to fall while the picture was mixed in Western Europe with sales up in France, steady in Britain and down in Spain and Italy.

Wezeman told Reuters that some of the recent declines in Europe had been caused by a perception of a lower military threat.

US, Iran hold new nuke talks in Geneva

AFP, Geneva

Senior officials from the United States and Iran resumed talks yesterday over Tehran's disputed nuclear programme, a diplomatic source said, three weeks after world powers missed a deadline for reaching a deal.

The two-day discussions in Geneva will be followed by a meeting on Wednesday involving the political directors of the other five permanent members of the UN Security Council, Germany and the European Union.

"I can confirm that the talks have begun," the diplomatic source told AFP, without giving further details.

Acting Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman flew in yesterday to lead the US delegation, US officials said, while deputy foreign minister Abbas Araqchi is leading the Iranian side, according to media in that country.

EU negotiator Helga Schmid will also take part in some of the bilateral discussions, ahead of the meeting of the full P5+1

on Wednesday.

The meeting is not set to involve foreign ministers.

It will be the first time the sides have met since failing to meet a November 24 deadline for a comprehensive deal with Iran on reining in its nuclear programme in exchange for an easing of crippling international sanctions.

The global powers and Iran agreed to give themselves seven more months -- until June 30 -- to strike a deal, although they hope to have the broad outlines hammered out by March.

A final agreement is aimed at ensuring Tehran will never develop nuclear weapons under the guise of its civilian activities.

Iran denies that it is seeking the bomb and insists its nuclear activities are for solely peaceful purposes.

Meanwhile, Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halaqi arrived in Tehran yesterday for talks with key ally Iran, his country's main backer in its civil war.

Miss South Africa crowned Miss World

AFP, London

Miss South Africa, 22-year-old Rolene Strauss, was crowned Miss World 2014 at the pageant's final in London on Sunday, with an estimated billion viewers watching on television around the globe.

Miss Hungary, Edina Kulcsar, was the runner-up and Miss United States, Elizabeth Saffrit, came third in the 64th annual competition, contested by women from 121 countries.

The medical student clasped her hands together in surprise and was crowned by the outgoing Miss World, Megan Young of the Philippines, before a fireworks finale.

"South Africa this is for you," Strauss said afterwards. "I think I will brace myself for what's about to happen. It's a huge responsibility."

This year's event has been rocked by the murder of Miss Honduras, 19-year-old Maria Jose Alvarado, who was shot dead along with her sister last month.

Their bodies were found on the day the beauty queen was due to travel to London.



Police in Honduras accuse her sister's boyfriend of shooting them after seeing his partner dancing with another man at a party.

Strauss will travel to the violence-hit central American nation to build a school named in the sisters' honour.

Sunday's show started with a spectacular choreographed dance routine, with all the contestants shimmering on stage in costumes inspired by their homelands, including Miss Bolivia in a colourful giant feathered headdress.