

Christchurch mosque shootings: Brenton Tarrant's shock guilty plea to murders

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Brenton Harrison Tarrant has today made a shock admission that he was the lone gunman who murdered 51 Muslims at two Christchurch mosques on March 15 last year.

NZ Herald

By: [Kurt Bayer](#) and [Anna Leask](#)

Brenton Harrison Tarrant has today made a shock admission that he was the lone gunman who murdered 51 Muslims at two Christchurch mosques on March 15 last year.

The 29-year-old Australian entered the guilty pleas at a special, hastily-arranged High Court hearing in Christchurch this morning.

Tarrant, who appeared from prison on a screen via audio-visual link (AVL) wearing a grey prison sweatshirt, pleaded guilty to all 51 murder charges.

He also admitted 40 charges of attempted murder relating to the two attacks at Masjid Al Noor and Linwood Islamic Centre on March 15 last year - and pleaded guilty to one charge of engaging in a terrorist act laid under the Terrorism Suppression Act 2002.



Brenton Tarrant appeared in court via audio-visual link and pleaded guilty to all the charges.

Temel Atacocugu was shot nine times at Al Noor by Tarrant.

He heard the news from one of the lawyers assigned to assist the victims.

"She called me and asked if I had read the text message," he said.

"I said no and she said the terrorist had changed his plea.

"I just said 'wow'."

Atacocugu said the pleas were "quite a surprise".

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"This is good news, I am happy - it will save us a lot of time and a lot of stress," he said.

Travelling to court every day for six weeks or more, potentially giving evidence and the mental and emotional stress that came with that had been weighing on Atacocugu's mind.

"Every day having to face the media, every day having to spend money," he said.

"It is a relief, this is a big win for us and for the community."

He said he had been "very emotional" around the anniversary but today that dark cloud lifted.

"When I heard this news, I felt good," he said.

"For me this is a good result, but I have questions.

"I want to know why he changed his plea - the judge should have asked him why, there are lots of question marks.

"But overall, I am thinking positively - this is a win, win situation."

Atacocugu will go to sentencing and hopes to read his victim impact statement to Tarrant.

He hopes there will be more answers that day about why he opened fire on the mosques

and why he changed his mind about his plea after so many other court appearances.

"He will have a long time to be thinking about what he did," he said of Tarrant's future.

"And maybe he will remember he is a human... maybe he wants to pay for what he did?"

Survivor Hisham Alzarzour who was shot multiple times by Tarrant, reacted quietly to the news.

He had been planning on attending the trial.

"It is good... it is good that he has pleaded guilty," he said.

"It is very good there will be no trial."

Alzarzour's wife Susan was almost speechless at the news.

"It is really good news," she said.

'It's about time': Grieving family

Omar Nabi, whose father Haji Daoud Nabi was killed in the attack, said he learned of the guilty plea just as he was about to go into prayer.

"It's about time. His plea should have been earlier but it's good he's changed his mind. And good to have it done," he said.

"There shouldn't have been a trial anyway. At end of the day the proof's in the pudding and he was caught red-handed, it speaks for itself."

Nabi said he was doing his best to forgive as his religion taught, although it was difficult.

"I'm the same as 50 other families, the first thing on their mind will be to forgive this man because he was led astray."

"But of course it's in our nature that if someone hurts your father, your mother, your brother... well. But I'm trying to have peace and harmony."

Hero who tackled gunman: 'I want to know why he did it'

Abdul Aziz Wahabzadah, who threw an Eftpos machine at the gunman in the car park at the Linwood mosque, and chased after him on foot as the shooter sped away by car, said he found out about the guilty plea today via email.

"It was a surprise. We should be notified if something like this is happening. It's a bit of a shock for the whole community," he said.

"I would have liked to be there, but we weren't told."



Abdul Aziz Wahabzadah, who threw an Eftpos machine at the gunman. Wahabzadah said while some people were happy with the guilty plea, his thinking was different.

"He's got his right to plead guilty. But I wanted to go to trial to find out why he did it, the reasons behind this nonsense," Wahabzadah said.

"I don't think we will find out now."

He said he was still finding it hard to come to terms with what happened, and felt this was another barrier to moving on.

"To be honest with you ... yeah I'm still struggling but can't do anything about it. I have to try and go forward."

Wahabzadah was currently in coronavirus lockdown with his family, after closing his store a week ago.

"We will just try to survive. Whatever we have try to do, we will do. But it's stressful. It's a lot to come at once."

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It might be easier to forgive after sentencing, Nabi said, and when it was clear the man would serve a long time inside.

"And I know that God will give him his own punishment. Just like on earth, you are punished, and when you die your soul will be tried."

The Federation of Islamic Association of New Zealand issued a statement this afternoon.

It said it was "greatly relieved by the recent news of the guilty plea by the terrorist.

"At a time when the country is focused on working together to overcome the pandemic, this news is most welcome.

"We are particularly relieved that the victims and their families are being spared the obvious agony of a trial."

FIANZ wanted to acknowledge the police and first responder, the hospitals, as well as the various health professionals for the services they have provided and continue to provide for the victims.

"IANZ also would like to convey our heartfelt appreciation of the support of the government and the whole of New Zealand to those victims who suffered from the tragedy of 15 March."

NZ's worst act of terrorism

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said the guilty plea would provide "some relief to the many people whose lives were shattered by what happened on March 15".

"These guilty pleas and conviction bring accountability for what happened and also save the families who lost loved ones, those who were injured, and other witnesses, the ordeal of a trial."

Police Commissioner Mike Bush welcomed today's resolution to what he described as the largest criminal prosecution in New Zealand history.

The two officers who arrested Tarrant, and later received bravery commendations, say they are "relieved" at today's guilty pleas.

New Zealand's worst-ever act of terrorism was filmed by the shooter and livestreamed on Facebook, leading to gun reforms and a global political summit initiated by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online.

Justice Cameron Mander convicted Tarrant on all charges today and remanded him in custody to a nominal date of May 1 when it's expected that a sentencing date will be set - once coronavirus-imposed court restrictions are eased.

None of the victims knew about today's remarkable, hurriedly-organised hearing.

The city's two imams, Imam Gamal Fouda of Masjid Al Noor and Imam Alabi Lateef from Linwood Islamic Centre, were asked to come to court today to witness proceedings on behalf of their Muslim communities.

But it's understood that even they didn't know what it was going to be about.

Fouda wept while the court registrar took several minutes to read aloud all 51 murder victims named on the Crown charge list, before asking Tarrant if he pleaded guilty or not guilty.

After Tarrant questioned one of the murder victim's names and it was clarified by the judge, he replied: "Oh OK, yes guilty."

Tarrant listened intently while the names were read out. He showed no emotion.

The 40 attempted murder charges, which again included the reading aloud of all of the victims, were also put to Tarrant. When he was asked his plea, he said: "Guilty."

He also pleaded guilty to one charge of engaging in a terrorist act on March 15 last year.



Today's court hearing in Christchurch.

The Crown's summary of facts, which outlines the offending, will be read out at sentencing.

Justice Mander called for a pre-sentence report and victim impact statements.

At the conclusion of the short hearing, Tarrant did not say anything as the AVL link was ended.

The June trial date has been vacated.

How today's hearing came about

Justice Mander then took time to explain to those inside court just how today's hearing came into being.

Earlier this week, the courts – which are deemed an essential service during the lockdown - received an indication from Tarrant's Auckland-based defence lawyers Shane Tait and Jonathan Hudson that he may seek to change his plea to the charges.

Yesterday, the lawyers received formal written instructions from Tarrant confirming he wanted to change his pleas and court staff started making urgent preparations for the case to be called as soon as possible – while doing so amidst the ramping up of the coronavirus lockdown which came into effect at midnight.



Tarrant's lawyers Shane Tait and Jonathan Hudson in court today.

While admitting it was "regrettable" to hold the hearing without any victims or family members being present, Justice Mander felt it could be managed if numbers inside the courtroom were severely limited. He said today signalled a "very significant step" in bringing finality to the proceedings.

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In the large Christchurch Justice Precinct courtroom this morning, there were only 17 people.

Five journalists from New Zealand's major media organisations were granted permission to be in court today. They were spread out across the courtroom as part of coronavirus personal distancing guidelines.

The two imams were also there, with a third member of the Muslim community, Detective Inspector Greg Murton, in charge of the investigation, Christchurch Crown Solicitor Mark Zarifeh and Crown prosecutor Barnaby Hawes, a court registrar, court taker, Ministry of Justice media representative, and court security officer.

The contents of today's hearing, which concluded at 10.30am, were subject to a court-imposed one-hour embargo to allow court and police victim support advisors to tell shooting survivors and family members about today's shock guilty pleas.

Hero cops who caught gunman 'relieved'

Police Association president Chris Cahill said the officers who arrested Tarrant were relieved with today's result.

It is likely Senior Constable Jim Manning and Senior Constable Scott Carmody would have been called to give evidence if Tarrant had gone to trial.



Tarrant was arrested by armed officers in a Christchurch street. Around 15 victims and a number of other police staff - from frontline to victim identification - would have also been called.

Cahill said it was "great news" that Tarrant had pleaded guilty.

"I think it's a really good piece of news, it's positive for the victims, their families and everyone really - it gives a little bit of closure," he told the Herald.

"There will be some frustration, perhaps, that without a trial a lot of the evidence doesn't get offered for people, but that will be outweighed by the difficulties that a trial would have caused.

"Witnesses will not have to recount and relive it and without a doubt the officers who arrested [Tarrant] will be relieved."

Cahill said the prospect of a trial had been weighing heavily on the minds of the arresting officers and others.

"This was causing them a lot of stress, the idea of having to go through this again," he said.

"Even though they are professionals, the court process is difficult.

"They will be taking a big sigh of relief today... My field officer spoke to them and they are very relieved."



An armed police officer guards the Al Noor mosque. Photo / Michael Craig
Cahill commended all police for their work on the mosque shooting investigation and trial preparation.

"The investigation and trial management teams along with the Crown Solicitor really need to be congratulated," he said.

"They had done so much but had so much more work still in front of them... this now means that staff can go out and look after New Zealand at this difficult time.

"It's very good timing."

Justice for victims 377 days after attacks

Tarrant was arrested minutes after leaving the Linwood mosque by two police officers scrambled into action from a training day.

He appeared in court the following morning charged with murder.



Brenton Tarrant has pleaded guilty to the Christchurch mosque shootings. At this third court appearance at the High Court on June 14, he was deemed fit to stand trial and entered not guilty pleas to all charges.

A jury trial was scheduled to begin at the High Court in Christchurch on June 2 this year.

March 15: How the day unfolded

1.30pm

Friday prayers begin at Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre

1.33pm

Gunman starts streaming FB live video. Drives a few blocks to Al Noor mosque

1.40pm

Gunman arrives at Al Noor Mosque and starts firing

1.41pm

First 111 calls to police

1.42pm

Comms report over police radio priority one event of machinegun fire at Deans Ave mosque

1.43pm

Gunman returns to his car for more weaponry, then returns to mosque

1.44pm

First 111 call to St John ambulance services

1.46pm

Gunman departs Al Noor mosque and heads to Linwood Islamic Centre, 7.3km away

1.47pm

First armed police unit arrives at Al Noor Mosque

1.49pm

Facebook livestream cuts out while gunman is driving to Linwood Islamic Centre

1.51pm

First Armed Offenders Squad arrives at Al Noor Mosque; first ambulance dispatched to Al Noor Mosque

1.52pm

Gunman enters Linwood Islamic Centre

1.55pm

Shooter leaves the Linwood mosque

1.57pm

First 111 St John Ambulance call from Linwood Islamic Centre

2.02pm

Suspected gunman is apprehended by two police officers on Brougham St, about 5km to 6km from Linwood Islamic Centre

2.16pm

Suspect is in custody at the Christchurch Justice Precinct

The trial loomed as one of the largest in New Zealand's criminal justice history.

Police Commissioner's response

Mike Bush said he appreciated that today's surprise guilty plea would come as a surprise to the victims and the public, some of whom may have wished to be present in the courtroom.

"The two Imams from the Al Noor and Linwood Avenue Mosques were present in the courtroom as representatives of the victims, as were representatives of the media.

"Suppression orders were put in place to allow police, victim court advisors and Victim support to advise as many of the victims as possible prior to the news being made public," Bush said.

The Police Commissioner described the case as New Zealand's largest-ever criminal prosecution.

"While the sentencing hearing is still pending, today's guilty pleas are a significant milestone in respect of one of our darkest days.

"I want to acknowledge the victims, their families and the community of Christchurch – the many lives that were changed forever. They have inspired all of us to be a kind and more tolerant community," Bush said.

He praised prosecutors and police staff and other agencies who worked on the case, commending them for their hard work.



A bloodied Tarrant was dragged from his vehicle by the armed arresting officers, who later received a commendation for bravery.

It was expected to last up to six weeks and, at one point, was thought to call as many as 300 witnesses. Much of the evidence would have been extremely confronting and distressing for the jury members – not to mention the survivors and family members of shooting victims.

He said the gunman's sentencing would not take place until it was possible for all victims who wish to attend the hearing to do so.

TARRANT'S TIMELINE OF APPEARANCES

Saturday March 16 2019 - Christchurch District Court

Tarrant makes his first appearance before a judge. His name is allowed to be published but his image is suppressed for now. He is charged with one count of murder but police say it is inevitable more charges will follow.

April 5 2019 - Christchurch High Court

More charges are laid against Tarrant. As of this date he faces 51 murder and 39 attempted murder charges. Justice Cameron Mander ordered two mental health assessments to establish whether Tarrant is fit to enter a plea and stand trial.

14 June 2019 - Christchurch High Court

Tarrant enters not guilty pleas to 51 charges of murder, 40 of attempted murder and a charge under the Terrorism Suppression Act 2002. A trial date is set for May 2020. At this hearing Justice Mander rules Tarrant is fit to stand trial. "No issue arises regarding the defendant's fitness to plead, to instruct counsel, and to stand his trial. A fitness hearing is not required," he said.

3 October 2019 - Christchurch High Court

Tarrant appears via audio visual link. The hearing is supposed to be around an application to move his trial out of Christchurch. However once the relevant parties are assembled in court Justice Mander confirms the application has been withdrawn.

12 September 2019

Justice Cameron Mander issues a minute confirming that Tarrant's trial date will be changed from May 2020 to June. The minute came after Crown prosecutor Mark Zarifeh filed a memorandum advising that "difficulties have arisen with the trial date because it clashes with the Islamic holy month of Ramadan". Ramadan occurs over the month of May next year, affecting many of the trial's witnesses.

10 December 2019 - Christchurch High Court

Pre-trial callover held. Tarrant's appearance is excused.

24 February 2020 - Christchurch High Court

Tarrant appears via audio visual link for a pre-trial hearing. The nature and content of that hearing is suppressed.

26 March 2020 - Christchurch High Court

Tarrant pleads guilty to all charges.