

Tragic Hostage Situation in the Philippines

*By Gary Noesner, Chief, FBI Crisis Negotiation Unit
(retired)*

*Author: Stalling For Time: My Life As An FBI Negotiator,
Random House*

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The dramatic television video of yesterday's 12 hour stand-off on a hijacked bus in the Philippines was horrific to watch. A squad of SWAT officers from the Manila police desperately tried to gain entry into the bus to stop the gunman from killing hostages. The video seemed frozen in time as the officers spent countless minutes unsuccessfully attempting to get inside, all while the gunman was killing hostages. Nine were killed, including the hostage taker.

The incident began when Rolando Mendoza, a 55 year old former policeman hijacked the bus and its occupants in a bid to be reinstated as a policeman following his dismissal the prior year for criminal conduct. Armed with an assault weapon, he commandeered a tourist bus in an attempt to gain attention and get his job back.

Earlier in the incident a dialogue was opened between Mendoza and the police and things seemed to be proceeding in a positive way. But then something went wrong. Something happened that rapidly turned the calmer atmosphere that had prevailed into one of chaos, confusion, and sheer terror for the hostages.

This was not a politically motivated act of terrorism; rather, this was one man venting his personal anger, rage, and frustration. Mendoza's anger stemmed from his belief that he had been unfairly terminated by the police; that he was disrespected, and no one was listening to his appeals. It seems that a feeling of desperation drove Mendoza's actions. He must have decided that by taking hostages he would either get his job back or die trying.

In such situations when the perpetrator is driven by strong emotions, it's critical that police make every effort to engage in a meaningful dialogue that demonstrates they are listening to him, that they respect his perspective, acknowledge his emotional reaction to events, and show that they genuinely want to help him. This process often takes a great deal of time. Only after the perpetrator's emotions are lowered can he begin to think more rationally, and be more receptive to a non-violent resolution. Perhaps Mendoza would have eventually settled for a serious inquiry about his grievances.

Sadly, many police departments around the world lack the skill and sophistication required to conduct calm, creative communications with such individuals. Skilled negotiations can be tremendously successful in avoiding bloodshed and securing peaceful endings, even in the most dangerous of situations. Often police agencies in the developing world exclusively focus their efforts on the use of tactical components to overpower or kill the perpetrator. Too often, negotiations are treated simply as a means to gain time for SWAT to move. We've seen many tragic outcomes when this mentality prevails. Unlike the movies, in real life SWAT teams don't always succeed with speed, surprise, and precision marksmanship. When tactical teams make such entries, the prognosis for loss of life dramatically increases. Hostages are more likely to die in a rescue attempt than at any other time.

We don't know why Mendoza finally turned violent. Did he conclude that he would not accomplish his goal and decided that he needed to end it all; taking his revenge on the system he believed victimized him? Or, did the police grow tired of the long stand-off and decide to take bolder tactical action; thereby triggering Mendoza's violent defensive reaction. Perhaps the tragedy that resulted was some combination of these factors.

What we do know is that such incidents happen in the United States and around the world all too frequently. We know that frustrated and angry individuals who believe no one is listening to them, who feel disrespected and victimized, can and will undertake violent actions, bringing them into conflict with law enforcement. When that happens it's vitally important the law enforcement agencies understand the motivation and behavior of such individuals; and that they have trained and competent negotiators ready to undertake efforts to defuse these situations. It's important to understand that listening is the cheapest and easiest concession we can make.

Just as important is the training of police officials in proper crisis management procedures. They need to be taught that tactical assault should always be the least desirable option, one taken only when the perpetrators actions leave no other recourse. Tactical action should never be taken just because we can, rather, it should be taken only when we have to. Our goal should not be to get even, but to get what we want – a peaceful ending.