

Report on the attack to burn Toowoomba Mosque

Professor Shahjahan Khan, President of Islamic Society of Toowoomba

The attempt to burn the Garden City Mosque in Toowoomba was discovered by some worshippers who came to the Mosque on Saturday, 24 January at about 12:30pm. When the glass on the entrance door of the meeting hall of the Mosque complex was found broken, several Muslims went to see the building. To their surprise they found the whole building full of smell due to burning of the timber on the floor of the building. The arson attacker spread lots of toilet tissues all across the building to let the fire spread everywhere. They also found the gas stove in the nearby kitchen was left open so that the fire may burst the gas bottle and engulf the whole compound. Later they found the signs of fire and flame at the entrance to the Imam's office in the main Mosque building.

The footage from the CCTV captured both spots in fire and shows significant duration of burning inside the meeting hall. It was confirmed that after the night prayers on Friday, 23 January 2015 when all the worshippers left the Mosque, one tall person with hood on his head entered the Mosque complex and set fire in the meeting hall about 9:30pm on Friday night. The attempt to burn the office of the Mosque took place at about 9:43pm. The attacker left the property at 9:48pm through the Mosque parking.

Burned hole at the centre of meeting hall of Toowoomba Mosque



Section of solidarity meeting on Monday, 26 January 2015



Broken glass door at the meeting hall of Toowoomba Mosque

I received a phone call from the Secretary of the Islamic Society of Toowoomba, Dr Md Shahiduzzaman just before I was going to pray Dhuhr prayers at about 1:00pm in the Darra Mosque in Brisbane. It was told about the attempt to break in causing some damage in the meeting hall. Later the Assistant Secretary, Dr Mainul Islam told me about the presence of a large number of police officers, fire and rescue crews, detectives, journalists and crews from TV stations, and members of the community.

While busy in shopping at Inala Plaza in Brisbane, I received a phone call from a Brisbane base journalist about the arson attack in Toowoomba Mosque that she learned from the Twitter. Another journalist from the Courier Mail of Brisbane phoned me and we agreed to meet in Toowoomba as he was going to the Mosque to cover the event. Quickly I left Brisbane and drove to Toowoomba as fast as I could, and directly went to the Mosque. It was about 4:30pm. By then the fire affected area was closed as a crime scene and experts from different government departments were conducting investigation. Several journalists wanted to talk to me, but I wanted to talk to the members of the Muslim community who first discovered the fire attempt before speaking to the media.

I talked to Dr Mainul Islam, Riad AlSaleh, Moyassar AlTaie, Muhammad Firoz and several others about what they found. They told me their experience and how they called the police when the fire burn was first discovered. Imam Abdul Kader went to Perth with personal leave and he was not available to consult. When I went to check the CCTV, one detective officer showed me who the attacker entered the property and the lighting of the fire inside the meeting hall.

We were not allowed to enter into the meeting hall and see the burning attempt of the office door at the rear side. But those who saw the fire burning first showed me the photos inside

meeting hall with a medium size hole on the timber floor that burned to the ground, about a meter depth. It was simply a miracle the fire did not spread much but burned the floor timber only. If fire could have reached gas stove or bottle the disaster would have reached beyond the Mosque complex. Given the way the fire was designed, it seems that only the explanation for not burning the Mosque is the protection of Allah that has saved His house.

Several other detectives joined the investigation in the evening and night. The fire and rescue people finish investigation at about 6:45pm, but the crime scene was still inaccessible to anyone. After about 9pm we were allowed to enter the meeting hall and the police already finish collecting all the evidences of the crime that they wanted. Graffiti was left on the fence near the parking area but it is not clear enough to make any sense.

The story of the arson attack has been covered by CCN at <http://www.crescentsofbrisbane.org/Newsletter/CCN0533.asp> and by the Courier Mail (Brisbane) at <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/toowoomba-mosque-damaged-by-fire/story-fnihsrf2-1227195635899> The Toowoomba Chronicle's coverage at <http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/fire-mosque-treated-suspicious-toowoomba/2521862/>

Some of the stories in the national and international media were not based on facts, rather distorted to wrongly indicate that the reason for fire as gas leak, and the claim that police suspected arson.

The Vice Chancellor of the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Professor Jan Thomas emailed me from Hong Kong expressing her concern for the Mosque and support for the community. I received email from the President of the Islamic Council of Victoria, Ghaith Kreyam, Habib Jamal of Gold Coast, Dr Mark Copland of Catholic Justice Commission, Ali Kadri of Holland Park, Yusuf Limbada of Brisbane, Dr Shamim Siddiqui of Roma, Muhammad Yusuf of Brisbane, and phone call from Dr John McVeigh, Agriculture Minister of Queensland among many others.

When Dr Mark Copland proposed to join a prayer in the Mosque to express his sympathy for the Muslim community, I told him to think about a show of support gathering by members of the wider community. He talked to several others and agreed to a meeting of solidarity at the Mosque on Monday, 26 January 2015 (Australia Day) at 3pm to avoid conflict/clash with other Australia Day programs in the city.

With a very short notice of several hours a range of dignitaries including Federal Minister of Industry and Research, Hon Ian Macfarlane MP, Queensland Minister of Agriculture, Dr John McVeigh, local indigenous elder Br Darby McCarthy, Acting Vice Chancellor of University of Southern Queensland, Professor Janet Verbyla, Representatives of the Catholic and Anglican Bishops of Toowoomba, Pure Land Learning College, Deputy VC of USQ, Professor Ken Udas, Director of International Office of USQ, Dr Talal Yusef, Labour Party Candidate for Toowoomba South, Graham Storey, and many others confirmed their participation in the meeting.

A solidarity gathering was held at the Garden City Mosque, Toowoomba on the request of a number of members of the wider community, mainly from different churches and multicultural organisations, on Monday, 26 January 2015 at the Mosque property. The main objective of the meeting was to demonstrate a show of support for the Muslim community after the arson attack in the main meeting hall of the Mosque which burned to a medium size hole on the timber floor.

The Executive Officer of the Catholic Justice Commission, Dr Mark Copland served as the Master of the Ceremony. The meeting started with the recitation from the Qur'an by Imam Abdul Kader and welcome by local indigenous elder Br Darby McCarthy.

The speakers in the meeting expressed their solidarity with the Muslim community and the Garden City Mosque. They confirmed that criminal act of an individual is no way representative of the peaceful residents of Toowoomba. Leaders in Toowoomba have invested a lot of efforts and resources to make the Garden City a Model City of Peace and Harmony and working hard to receive UNESCO recognition.

The story on the solidarity meeting was covered in the daily Toowoomba Chronicle and can be accessed at <http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/arson-attack-denounced-mosque-toowoomba/2523384/>
<http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/city-values-its-diversity/2523218/>

The police is yet to identify and capture the perpetrator. The repair of the damage to the Mosque complex would start after getting suitable quotations and sourcing necessary fund. The Committee is also exploring options to upgrade security, and may need to hire provide security company with proper alarm system.

My written address to the solidarity gathering is reported below:

Solidarity gathering at Toowoomba Mosque, Monday, 26 January 2015

Dear friends and community members: Assalamu Alaikum Warahmatullah. Peace and blessing of Allah be upon you.

I am very humble to welcome you to the Garden City Mosque. In deed this is a Mosque for everyone, and you are always welcome to visit this place of worship regardless of your faith.

Once again Toowoomba is on the national and international media for wrong reasons. One person's criminal act no way represents the dignified residents of a proud community of peace and harmony. Special thanks to everyone here for taking time to turn up to the Mosque on an Australia Day, with competing priorities and family commitments.

Your presence here in the Mosque after the failed burning attempt is highly appreciated by the community of Muslims all over the world. I congratulate and thank you for your courage and determination to stand side by side with your fellow Muslim citizens. Friends are tested through difficult time – you are tested and passed the test of the time. We are friends in humanity and proud sons and daughters of Adam and Eve.

I don't think this attack will do anything to create any divisions in the broader community or ruin any of the harmony that has been created in Toowoomba. We have very good relationships with our neighbours, the city council and other religious leaders here. We believe that will continue.

Acts of destruction and violence would only bring the communities together. The perpetrators will have nothing but frustration and disappointment, certainly no sympathy no support from the community.

Some people may try to relate the recent attacks in Sydney and Paris to the arson in Toowoomba Mosque. Let me condemn any attack on innocent people by anyone in the name of any religion. No innocent people can be harmed or killed, ironically saving life is Islamic, not killing. Myself and all Muslims in Toowoomba are against any kind of terrorism and violent act.

The Pope Benedict XVI correctly explained there should be limit to freedom of speech. I thank him and his followers for a balanced view and stand on the very sensitive issue. There is no freedom of destruction, no freedom to attack/burn place of worship or people of universal repute and honour in the name of freedom of speech.

Let me clear it once again, over 1.7 billion Muslims love Prophet Muhammad (sww) more than their own lives and they recite his name at least four times in each of the five times daily prayers. No cartoons or vile articles on him will change an iota of respect and honour of Muhammad (sww). No one has any right to joke about the man who has been chosen by Allah and has raised his praise.

The holy Qur'an says, "Mankind was one single nation" 2:213. "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other" 49:13. We are all from Adam and Eve, we could trace back to the same ancestors. Allah has created each one of us as his representative (khalifah) on earth. We must reflect on our obligation as the representative of God as we all are accountable to Him for every single act anywhere on this earth.

As followers of revealed religion, Muslims must believe in Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and all other prophets, peace be upon them, and the Qur'an hails them very highly. There are lot more common in the Bible and the Qur'an than the differences we would find – both books came from the same source the Almighty Lord.

The news of this attack has been covered by many national and international media. This will be very unhelpful, to say the least, in Toowoomba's bid to be declared as the 'City of Peace and Harmony' by the UNESCO. The attacker of the Mosque has indeed attacked on the hard work of the resident of this city and its Council.

To Toowoomba Residents: Toowoomba Regional Council, University of Southern Queensland, Pure Land Learning College, Islamic Society of Toowoomba and many residents and organisations of the Garden City have been working very hard for

sustainable peace and harmony in the community. You have once again shown the unified support for the first Mosque of your city. I am sure this will further reputation of you and your city.

To Media: The bad news has hit many national and international media outlets. That was an act of one person. Look at this meeting how many dignitaries and members of the community are here for solidarity with Muslims. Please make an extra effort to get the message of unity of Toowoomba residents out in the world.

To Fellow Muslims: Thankyou for your patience and not reacting to provocation, and that is what your religion, Islam, teaches you. You will receive reward from your Lord. The show of support for you from the people of other faith today gives an obligation to support them whenever needed. We must appreciate these friends and extend support and return the favours when appropriate. This is the minimum we should be doing as members of the same human family.

To Government Officials: Government support to secure the place of worship that are high risk to avoid potentially serious consequences. Law enforcing agencies must take appropriate steps to secure places of worship.

Thank you again, and may God bless you and God bless Australia.

Professor Shahjahan Khan, President of Islamic Society of Toowoomba, and Vice President of Islamic Council of Qld