

world

Italy driver hijacks, torches school bus

● 51 students were in the bus at the time of incident

● A dozen children and two of the adults were taken to hospital for smoke inhalation

● Hijacker "wanted the whole world talking about his story"

● One of the children managed to pick up a phone that had been dropped and call their parents who in turn phoned the police

AFP | Rome, Italy

Italian police on Wednesday rescued 51 children taken hostage by their school bus driver, who doused the vehicle in petrol and set it alight apparently in protest at migrant deaths in the Mediterranean.

Some of the children were tied up during the 30-minute ordeal, which saw the bus slam into a car but was brought to an end by police after one of the children was able to call for help. No one was seriously injured.

"It is a miracle, it could have been carnage. The police were outstanding, blocking the bus and getting the children off," said Milan prosecutor Francesco Greco.

Photos showed the burnt-out shell of the bus and the car, which were travelling on a road near Milan.

Driver Ousseynou Sy -- a 47-year-old Italian citizen of Senegalese origin -- explained under questioning that he wanted "to draw attention to the consequences of migra-



The wreckage of a school bus that was transporting some 50 children is pictured after it was torched by the bus' driver, in San Donato Milanese, southeast of Milan.



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"No one is getting out of here alive," he said, according to several of the students.

A dozen children and two of the adults were taken to hospital for smoke inhalation while the arrested driver also needed treatment for burns to his hands.

The Milan police anti-terrorism unit has been charged with investigating the hostage-taking which lasted a little over 30 minutes.

Tied up

However Sy had no links with Islamic terrorism, Alberto Nobili, head of counter-terrorism at the Milan public prosecutor's office, told a press conference, saying he "acted as a lone wolf".

Planning the hijack over several days, Nobili said Sy "wanted the whole world talking about his story". He posted a video on Youtube to explain his actions and say "Africa -- arise", directed at family and friends in Crema but also in Senegal.

The driver, armed with two canisters filled with petrol and a cigarette lighter, threatened the children, took their telephones and told the adults to tie them

up with electric cable.

"I lost three children at sea," he said, according to one of the rescued children.

"He threatened us, said that if we moved he would pour the petrol and set it alight. He kept saying there were so many people in Africa who kept dying and that it was the fault of (deputy prime ministers) Di Maio and Salvini," a rescued girl told Italian media.

Luigi Di Maio and in particular Matteo Salvini, who is also interior minister, have taken a hard line against migrants since they formed a populist coalition government in June, including trying to close Italian ports to ships that rescue migrants in the Mediterranean.

"Then the police arrived and saved us," the rescued girl said.

Prosecutor Greco said the man kept two of the children close to him, brandishing the lighter. The bus crashed into a car, from which a father and son escaped before it burst into flames.

One of the children managed to pick up a phone that had been dropped and call their parents who in turn phoned the police.

"I hurt my hands a bit picking it up... we were all terrified," the boy told Italian television.

Police blocked the bus in the street and broke open the back windows to get the children out before the vehicle went up in flames.

"The children were banging on the windows, calling for help," said Roberto Manucci, one of six carabinieri at the scene.

Thousands of migrants have crossed from North Africa to Italy, many of them losing their lives on the dangerous journey.

"I want to put an end to it, I want to stop the deaths in the Mediterranean," several reports cited the driver as saying.

Tough anti-migrant laws

Sy had been an Italian citizen since 2004, with reports saying he was divorced from his Italian wife and has two teenage children.

The interior ministry said in a statement that the driver had been previously caught driving while drunk and had sexually assaulted a minor. It gave no dates for the alleged offences.

Interior ministry sources said the minister was looking at withdrawing the driver's Italian citizenship, a move made possible by tough anti-migrant legislation adopted late last year.

Earlier on Wednesday Salvini said his immigration policies had saved thousands of lives. "Fewer departures, fewer arrivals, fewer deaths," he said.

New Zealand bans assault weapons, triggering similar calls in US

● New Zealand's steps include interim measures to prevent any rush to purchase guns

● For the guns already out there, Ardern announced a buyback scheme

Wellington, New Zealand

New Zealand imposed an immediate ban on assault weapons yesterday, taking swift action in response to the Christchurch massacre and triggering renewed calls from leading American politicians for curbs in the United States.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said assault rifles and military-style semi-automatic weapons would be banned with im-

mediate effect, making good on a pledge to ensure that nothing like last week's slaughter of 50 people ever occurs in the Pacific nation again.

The killings by an Australian white supremacist have caused national soul-searching over New Zealand's lax gun laws.

But the tough crackdown promises to have political repercussions beyond the country's shores, including in the United States where gun control is one of the most divisive political issues.

"In short, every semi-automatic weapon used in the terrorist attack on Friday will be banned in this country," Ardern said.

She added that high-capacity magazines and devices similar to bump stocks -- which allow users to fire weapons faster -- will also be banned.

Proponents of gun control in the United States and around



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern

the world praised the move and denounced the US pro-gun lobby on social media, while American gun supporters defended their constitutional right to bear arms.

'Follow NZ's lead'

"This is what real action to stop gun violence looks like," Democratic US Senator and presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders tweeted.

"We must follow New Zealand's lead, take on the NRA

(National Rifle Association) and ban the sale and distribution of assault weapons in the United States."

High-profile Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez contrasted the swift ban with US failure to enact even modest controls following recurring deadly shootings such as the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut in 2012, in which 20 children and six school staff died.

"Sandy Hook happened 6 years ago and we can't even get the Senate to hold a vote on universal background checks," Ocasio-Cortez tweeted.

"Christchurch happened, and within days New Zealand acted to get weapons of war out of the consumer market. This is what leadership looks like."

No reaction was immediately seen on the Twitter feed of US President Donald Trump.

Alleged shooter Brenton Tar-

rant livestreamed the carnage in real-time, and the horrific scenes have heightened global concern over access to guns and the use of social media by extremists.

New Zealand's steps include interim measures to prevent any rush to purchase guns before legislation is enacted and effectively outlaw all such weapons already in private possession.

"The effect of this will mean that no one will be able to buy these weapons without a permit to procure from the police. I can assure people that there is no point in applying for such a permit," Ardern said.

For the guns already out there, Ardern announced a buyback scheme that will cost between Nz\$100 million and \$200 million (between US\$69 million and \$139 million), depending on the number of weapons received and valuations.