

Effectiveness of the Australian Government's response to Australian citizens who are kidnapped and held for ransom overseas

Submission by Nikki Sorbello, News Editor at the Bundaberg NewsMail

I wish to make a submission to the inquiry that is both from a personal, as well as a professional, nature. Both would fall under term of reference (d) any other related matter, and that is the treatment of the media during the kidnapping case of photojournalist Nigel Brennan.

BACKGROUND

I had worked with Mr Brennan at the NewsMail during his employment at the paper from January 2007 to January 2008, both as a colleague and later as the chief of staff. I often socialised with Mr Brennan and other colleagues during this time and consider him a friend.

This personal relationship, not only with me, but with other senior members of the NewsMail editorial team, did affect our decisions on how we reported the story of Mr Brennan's kidnapping in Somalia.

I believe our personal connection to Mr Brennan, whose family still live in Bundaberg, put the NewsMail in a unique position where the community expected to be kept up to date with the kidnapping case of one of their own, whom many had come into contact with through his work at the paper. We made an editorial decision that we needed to do something to remember the plight of our friend and colleague.

It was decided we would place Mr Brennan's photograph, with the number of days he was held in captivity in each edition of the paper. This was a decision that was faithfully followed until his release 462 days later.

During Mr Brennan's captivity, my role at the NewsMail was chief of staff. I was also acting editor for four months, in May 2008 and from July to September 2009?.

SUBMISSION

I would like to draw the committee's attention to the 1997 inquiry into Helping Australian Abroad – A review of the Australian Government's Consular Services.

In Paragraph 21 of the executive summary, the report states

"The committee believes that DFAT's total media 'no comment' policy, either on or off the record, was a mistake.

"If the department was unhelpful to the media, and unprepared to guide and work with the media ... the department is in no position to criticize the media for what is broadcast or written.

"The committee believes that DFAT should enter into more co-operative arrangements with the media in any future hostage crises.

The committee recommended in Recommendation 22 that
“In any future hostage crisis or similar event, DFAT provide guidance to the media, rather than ignore the media.”

Nothing has changed since this 1997 report, as everything the committee recommended was experienced by the NewsMail.

- There was a no comment policy, on and off the record,
- The NewsMail were told to stop reporting on the case, and I was personally threatened as being responsible for Mr Brennan’s safety
- There was never any co-operation between DFAT and the NewsMail
- The NewsMail was forced to rely on information for other news organizations and freelance journalists as our main source of information.

The NewsMail’s experience with DFAT during Mr Brennan’s captivity was not a professional, nor positive, experience.

When Mr Brennan was first kidnapped, we were provided with a statement from DFAT. The department refused to answer any questions or make further comment other than the supplied statement. Within days the NewsMail received a letter advising us to cease coverage of the kidnapping. The NewsMail reported just five days after the kidnapping we would be minimizing coverage of the case, at the directive of the department. Mr Brennan’s captivity continued for 15 months. During that time the NewsMail made repeated requests for information from DFAT. These requests were made formally with questions via email, via telephone to get general information or request for any updates. Each time these requests were denied and we were told that no comment could be made.

As the NewsMail was committed to running something in each edition of the paper, we continued to do so with what little information we had. Sometimes we only ran a photograph and days hostage count. Other times this information came from what was being reported by other news sources in Africa and Canada, or what AAP was reporting about the lawlessness in Somalia.

A number of times DFAT contacted the NewsMail demanding that we cease all publication of the kidnapping story. When this was done, we were provided with no information as to why we should do this, no information on the case or if it was progressing.

On one occasion, about half-way through Mr Brennan’s kidnapping, I took a phone call from a member of the DFAT media team. It was in response to a number of questions I had sent, via email, for a story I was working on. The majority of the questions were based on the initial responses we had from DFAT when Mr Brennan was first kidnapped. The questions were asking DFAT to confirm or update all the points they had made in initial responses – about consular assistance, about federal police presence, etc.

I was told I would not be getting a response. When I asked why, as this was information DFAT had released to the public before, and I was just asking if this was still the current situation, I was told we should not be reporting on the kidnapping at all. I was then told that I would personally be held responsible if anything were to happen to Mr Brennan and that I was putting him in danger.

As a friend of Mr Brennan's, his welfare and safety was always forefront of my mind and of numerous discussions we had about our coverage of his story. We were never once asked to stop publication by the Brennan family. We were thanked by countless members of the public for the continuing presence of Mr Brennan in the paper.

During Mr Brennan's captivity, the NewsMail was only able to get information about his situation and cover speculation about the kidnapping through other networks of journalists, including contacts at Reporters Without Borders, freelance journalists in Africa, information from Somalia news blogs and the like, as well as information that was being reported in African and Canadian publications. This information was freely available on the internet, yet was not something DFAT was willing to comment on.

Given this information was regularly available, I could not understand why DFAT refused to make regular statements about the case. We reported this information anyway, regardless of the fact the DFAT would say nothing.

Towards the end of Mr Brennan's captivity, the paper began to have more to do with the Brennan family again, having more regular meetings with them in which they would keep us updated of the progress of the case. The NewsMail also assisted the family with publicity for a community fundraising day. While there were concerns about publication of this, the NewsMail was able to prevent any of these stories from appearing on our website or the internet, effectively preventing any publication outside our readership area, and making sure that no suggestion of fundraising in Australia could possibly reach the kidnappers. This was a simple request and it was easy to uphold.

We believed that if we could guarantee no online publication of all our stories relating to Mr Brennan and his situation, DFAT should have been more co-operative – at the very least giving us background information if not actual material for publication. As Mr Brennan's local newspaper and former team of colleagues, we would always have respected guidance we were given in relation to his situation and safety – if only we were told.