

By Scott Stewart

On Aug. 23, Rolando Mendoza, a former senior police inspector with the Manila police department, boarded a tourist bus in downtown Manila and took control of the vehicle, holding the 25 occupants (tourists from Hong Kong and their Philippine guides) hostage. Mendoza, who was dressed in his police inspector's uniform, was armed with an M16-type rifle and at least one handgun.

According to the police, Mendoza had been discharged from the department after being charged with extortion. Mendoza claimed the charges were fabricated and had fought a protracted administrative and legal battle in his effort to be reinstated. Apparently, Mendoza's frustration over this process led to his plan to take the hostages. The fact that Mendoza entertained hope of regaining his police job by breaking the law and taking hostages speaks volumes about his mental state at the time of the incident.

After several hours of negotiation failed to convince Mendoza to surrender, communications broke down, Mendoza began to shoot hostages and police launched a clumsy and prolonged tactical operation to storm the bus. The operation lasted for more than an hour and left Mendoza and eight of the tourists dead at the end of a very public and protracted case of violence stemming from a workplace grievance.

Hostage-rescue operations are some of the most difficult and demanding tactical operations for police and military. To be successful, they require a great deal of training and planning and must be carefully executed. Because of this, hostage-rescue teams are among the most elite police and military units in the world. Since these teams are always training and learning, they pay close attention to operations like the one in Manila and study these operations carefully. They seek to adopt and incorporate tactics and techniques that work and learn from any mistakes that were made so they can avoid repeating them. Even in highly successful operations, there are always areas that can be improved upon and lessons that can be learned.

Indeed, in the Manila case, the events that unfolded provided a litany of lessons for hostage-rescue teams. The case will almost certainly be used in law enforcement and military classrooms across the globe for years as a textbook example of what not to do.

Breakdown of the Incident

Shortly after 10 a.m. on Aug. 23, Mendoza commandeered the bus and its occupants (his police inspector's uniform was likely helpful in gaining him access to the vehicle). Within minutes, he released two female hostages. Soon thereafter he released four hostages (a woman and three children). Mendoza used a cell phone to call the Manila police, inform them of the situation and make his demands: that the charges against him be dropped by the police ombudsman's office

and that he be reinstated to the police force. These early hostage releases would generally be seen as a positive sign by the authorities, showing that Mendoza had some compassion for the women and children and that even if he was reducing the number of hostages for pragmatic, tactical reasons (to allow him better control over the group), he was at least reducing the number by releasing people and not killing them.

The police maintained communications with Mendoza, who stayed aboard the bus and kept the motor running. This not only kept the vehicle cool, but allowed Mendoza to watch events unfold around the bus on the onboard television set. He had his hostages close the curtains on the bus to make it more difficult for the authorities to determine where he was in the bus.

Shortly after 1 p.m., Mendoza requested more gasoline for the bus and some food. He released another hostage, an elderly man, in return for the gas and food. Two other hostages, both Philippine photographers, were released as a 3 p.m. deadline for action set by Mendoza came and went (one of the photographers was released before, one after). There were also reports that Mendoza had initially set a 12:30 p.m. deadline for action. The fact that these deadlines passed without violence would be an encouraging sign to the authorities that the incident could be resolved without bloodshed. Food was again taken out to the bus just before 5 p.m. During the afternoon, Mendoza could have been engaged by snipers on at least two occasions, but since negotiations were proceeding well and Mendoza did not appear to be close to shooting, the decision was made to try and wait him out and not attempt to kill him. If the snipers failed to incapacitate Mendoza, it could have risked the lives of the hostages.

During the ordeal, Mendoza continued to watch events unfold on the television inside the bus and reportedly even talked to journalists via cell phone. Mendoza also ordered the bus driver to park the vehicle sideways in the center of the road in an apparent attempt to make it more difficult to approach without detection.

Things took a marked turn for the worse around 6:20 p.m., when negotiators, accompanied by Mendoza's brother Gregorio (who is also a police officer and who had earlier helped convince Mendoza to extend his deadline), approached the bus with a letter from the office of the ombudsman offering to reopen his case. Mendoza rejected the letter, saying he wanted his case dismissed, not reviewed. At this point, there are conflicting reports of what happened. The police negotiators told the Philippine Daily Inquirer that Mendoza's brother told Mendoza that the letter from the ombudsman's office was garbage and that he should not surrender. Other press reports indicate that the brother pleaded with Mendoza to take him hostage and release the tourists and that his pleading was seen as counterproductive to the negotiations.

Whatever the story, Mendoza's brother was then arrested and his arrest was carried live on television and seen by Mendoza in the bus. Shortly after his brother's arrest, Mendoza fired two warning shots and demanded in a radio interview that all the Manila Police Department SWAT officers be removed from the scene. Shortly after 7 p.m., Mendoza repeated his threats and refused to speak to his family members. Growing increasingly agitated, Mendoza shot two of the hostages when his demand for the SWAT officers to retreat was not met. He released the Philippine bus driver, who reportedly told police that all the hostages were dead. (We are unsure why the driver said this when only two of the passengers had been killed, but the police

would have been able to tell from the volume of fire that Mendoza had not truly killed all the hostages.)

At about 7:30 p.m., the tires of the bus were shot out and a police tactical team approached the vehicle and began to smash its windows with a sledgehammer. The police attempted to slowly enter the back of the bus by crawling through one of the shattered windows from the top of a police truck but were forced back out of the window by gunfire.

At about 8:40 p.m., police deployed tear gas into the back of the bus through the missing windows. Gunfire erupted and Mendoza was finally killed in a hail of bullets. Six additional hostages also perished during the exchange of gunfire. It is unclear at this point if they were intentionally shot by Mendoza or if they were caught in the crossfire.

Hostage Situations

By the time of the rescue attempt, the saga of Mendoza's firing from the police force had been going on for some time, and it is important to recognize that he did not make a spontaneous decision to seize the tourist bus. Even if the bus was targeted shortly before the attack, Mendoza's path toward violent action would have included several significant warning signs. As in almost any case of violence that stems from issues in the workplace, once the chain of events are examined more closely, reports will emerge that warning signs were either missed or ignored. Had those warning signs been noted and acted upon, this situation might have been avoided.

Since the event was not pre-empted, once it happened and developed into a hostage situation, the primary objective of the authorities was to resolve the incident without violence. Skillful hostage negotiators do this by allowing the hostage-taker to vent. They also work hard to defuse any tension that has the attacker on edge and to gently wear the attacker down to the point of surrender. One of the essential principles in this effort is to isolate the hostage-taker so that he or she cannot receive outside communication, motivation, encouragement or other forms of support. Hostage negotiators seek to control the flow of all information into or out of the crime scene. That did not occur in this case. Mendoza was able to talk to outsiders on his cell phone and even gave media interviews. He was also able to use the television in the bus to watch live media coverage of the incident, including video of the deployment of police officers. This gave him a considerable advantage and far more information than what he could have observed with his eyes from inside the curtained bus.

As shown in the November 2008 attack in Mumbai, India, it has become more difficult to isolate assailants from outside communications in the cell phone era, but there are ways that such communications can be disabled. It is not known why the Manila police did not attempt to jam the outside communication signals going to and from the bus, but that is certainly something that will come up in the after-action review, as will their handling of the media and onlookers (one of whom was wounded) during the incident.

As negotiations are proceeding in a hostage situation, the authorities must always be busily preparing to launch an assault in case negotiations fail. When the assailant is agitated or

mentally disturbed, the situation on the ground can sometimes change quite rapidly, and the rescue team needs to be prepared to act on a moment's notice. Usually the team will come in with an initial assault plan and then alter and refine their plan as more intelligence becomes available, and as they become more familiar with the site and the situation.

If the hostages are being held in a building, the rescue team will get the blueprints of the building and collect as much information as possible in an effort to plan their assault on the location where the hostages are being held. In this case, the hostages were being held on a stationary bus, which made it far easier to collect that type of intelligence — a bus is a bus. The authorities also had access to released hostages who, had they been debriefed, could have described to authorities the situation inside the bus.

In a protracted hostage situation, the authorities will frequently employ technical measures to gather additional intelligence on the activities of the hostage-taker. This may involve the use of overt or clandestine video equipment, parabolic microphones or microphones surreptitiously placed in or near the site. Even thermal imaging sets and technical equipment to intercept cell phone communication or radio transmissions are sometimes used.

All the information gleaned from such efforts will not only go to the negotiators, to help them understand the hostage-taker's frame of mind, but will also be used to help the rescue team fine-tune their assault plan.

Meanwhile, as the assault plan is being tweaked, negotiations continue and the hostage negotiators work to wear down the hostage-taker. It appears that the negotiators in the Mendoza case were doing a fairly good job of keeping the situation calm until the situation flared up involving Mendoza's brother and the letter from the ombudsman's office. Authorities clearly erred by not sending him a letter saying they had dropped the case against him. (They did not need the extortion charges now that they could arrest him and charge him with kidnapping and a host of other crimes.) It is hard to understand why the police department quibbled over words and refused to give him the piece of paper he expressly demanded. The police then aggravated the situation greatly with the public arrest of Mendoza's brother. Those two events caused the situation to deteriorate rapidly and resulted in Mendoza's decision to begin shooting. Once he shot the first two hostages, the negotiations were clearly over and it was time to implement a tactical solution to the problem.

The Use of Force

In a hostage situation, the use of force is a last resort. If force is required, however, the rescue team needs to hit hard, hit fast and hit accurately. There is little time for hesitation or error: Lives hang in the balance. This is where things began to get very ugly in the Mendoza case. Not only was there a delay between the murder of the first hostages and the launching of the first assault attempt, the assault was not hard, fast or accurate. To succeed, an assault should be dynamic, assume control of the scene by overwhelming force and use surprise and confusion to catch the hostage-taker off guard and quickly incapacitate him. The rescue team needs to dominate the place where the entry is being made and then quickly and accurately shoot the assailant. When the police began to smash the windows of the bus with sledgehammers and then continued to

beat on the windows for more than a minute, Mendoza had ample time to kill his hostages had he wished to do so. The only thing that saved the hostages who did survive was Mendoza's apparent reluctance to kill them.

It appears that the intent of the police was to smash the rear window to provide an opening and then to continue smashing windows as they moved forward in an effort to draw Mendoza's attention to the front of the bus while the assault team entered from the rear. When the police did attempt to enter the bus using the roof of the police vehicle, however, it was a slow, clumsy attempt that was quickly repelled by Mendoza once he opened fire on the team. They did not enter the bus quickly, and their tepid approach caused them to lose the element of tactical surprise, denied them the opportunity to employ overwhelming force and allowed Mendoza time to think and react and begin firing. There was no hope of the assault team's dominating the breaching point (or the rest of the bus) when they entered in such a half-hearted manner. Then, instead of following through with the assault by storming the front door while Mendoza was firing at the police in the rear of the bus, the police withdrew and went back to the drawing board. Again, had Mendoza wanted to kill all his remaining hostages, the withdrawal of the assault team gave him ample time to do so.

More than an hour after the first assault, the police again approached the bus and deployed tear gas grenades through the broken windows at the back of the bus. This flushed Mendoza toward the front of the bus and, after a brief exchange of gunfire, he was killed. There were some reports that he was killed by a police sniper, but we have seen no evidence to corroborate those reports, and it appears that he was shot from a relatively short range. Eight of the hostages survived the ordeal.

Granted, a bus does offer some challenges for a takedown operation, but is also a very common form of transportation throughout the world, and there have been numerous hostage situations involving buses in many different countries. Because of this, professional rescue teams frequently practice bus takedowns in much the same way they practice building takedowns or aircraft takedowns.

It was very apparent that the Manila SWAT unit lacked the experience, equipment and training to conduct effective hostage-rescue operations, and we have seen this problem in other local police departments in the developing world. We have not been able to learn why the police did not seek the help of a national-level hostage-rescue unit for the tactical aspect of this situation rather than leaving it to the Manila SWAT team to resolve. Given the prolonged duration of the situation and the location in the nation's capital, higher-level assets should have had time to deploy to the scene.

Unlike many cases of workplace violence, this one did not involve a disgruntled employee charging into his former office with guns blazing. Instead, Mendoza embarked on a course of action that would, as it turned out, cause a great deal of public humiliation for his former employer. Indeed, the head of the Manila police district tendered his resignation Aug. 24. Four leaders of the Manila SWAT team were also placed on administrative leave.

In the past, some botched rescue attempts have spurred inquiries that have resulted in

countries creating or dramatically improving their hostage-rescue capabilities. For example, the failed rescue attempt in Munich in 1972 led to the creation of Germany's GSG-9, one of the most competent hostage-rescue teams in the world. It will be interesting to see if the Mendoza case spurs similar developments in the Philippines, a country facing a number of security threats.

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