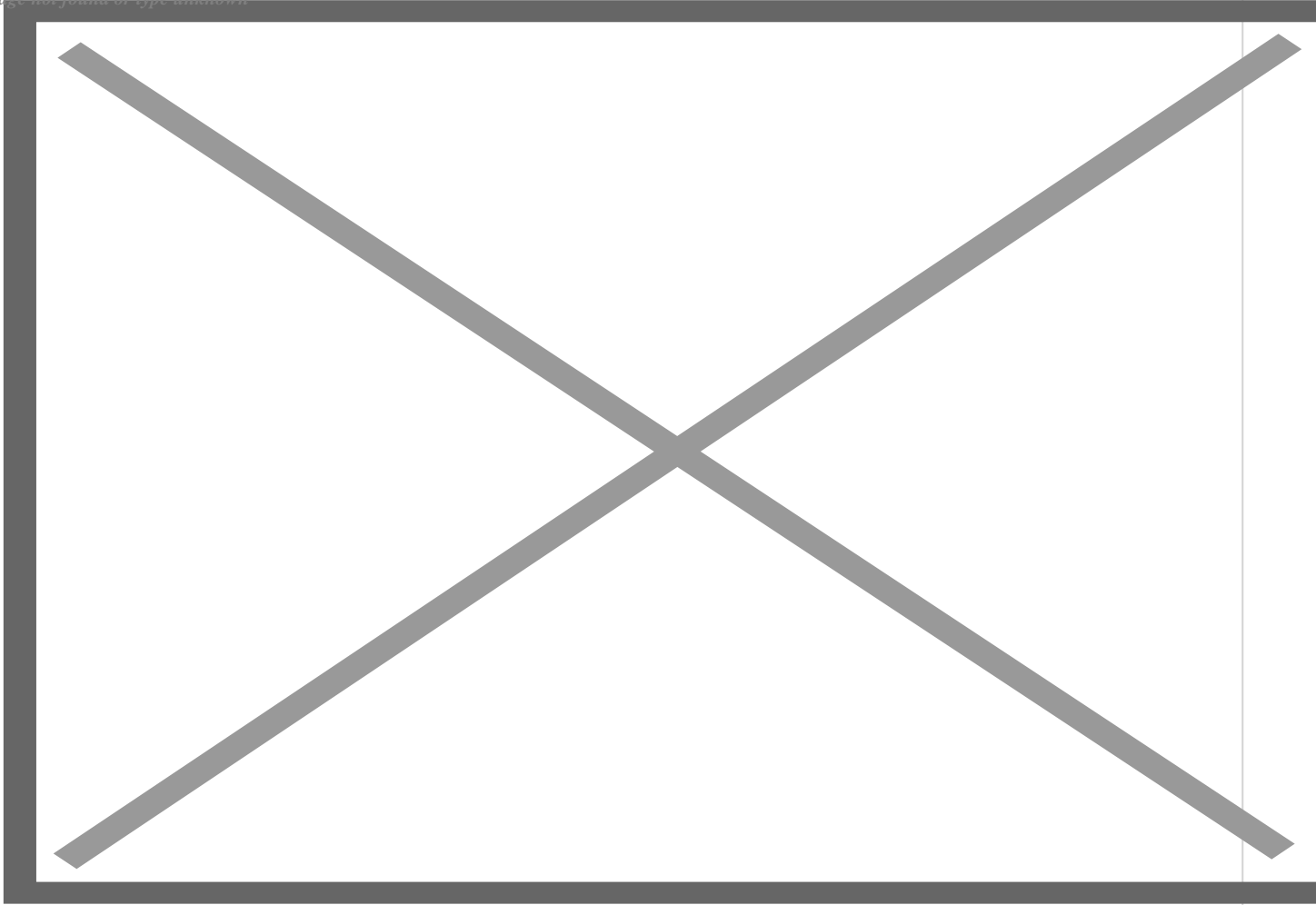


Hostages at Texas synagogue freed after hours-long standoff

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SWAT team members deploy near the Congregation Beth Israel Synagogue in Colleyville, Texas
[Andy Jacobsohn/ AFP]

Dallas, January 16 (RHC)-- Four people who were held hostage at a synagogue in the U.S. state of Texas have been safely released, more than 10 hours after a man disrupted a religious service and began a tense stand-off with the police.

Local reporters said they heard the sound of explosions, possibly flashbangs, and the sound of gunfire on Saturday afternoon, shortly before Texas Governor Greg Abbott announced the crisis was over. "Prayers

answered. All hostages are out alive and safe,” Abbott said on Twitter

The Colleyville Police Department said it first responded to Congregation Beth Israel at 10:41am local time (16:41 GMT) on Saturday, during the Shabbat service, which was being broadcast online. SWAT teams were deployed and residents of the area were evacuated.

Two law enforcement officials told The Associated Press news agency earlier in the day that at least four hostages were believed to be inside the synagogue. They spoke to AP on the condition of anonymity as they were not authorised to discuss the ongoing investigation.

One of the officials said the synagogue’s rabbi was believed to be among the hostages. The officials said the hostage-taker was heard demanding the release of Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist who was sentenced in 2010 to 86 years in prison on charges that she assaulted and shot at US military officers after being detained in Afghanistan.

The punishment sparked outrage in Pakistan among political leaders and her supporters, who viewed her as victimised by the American criminal justice system. Siddiqui is in federal prison in Texas.

The officials told AP that the hostage-taker also said he wanted to be able to speak with Siddiqui. They said investigators have not identified the man and cautioned that the information was based on a preliminary investigation as the situation was still rapidly developing.

ABC News, citing an official briefed on the matter, said the hostage-taker is claiming to be Siddiqui’s brother. But the official also said authorities are yet to confirm his identity.

Katie Chaumont, spokeswoman for FBI Dallas, said an FBI SWAT team was at the scene and that crisis negotiators had been communicating with someone inside the synagogue. But she could not say whether the person was armed and she declined to describe what the person had said to authorities, citing operational sensitivity.

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