

Bomb threats cause disruption in schools across New Zealand

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The New Zealand Police said that it did 'not believe there is a safety risk' linked to the calls but that it was taking the threats 'extremely seriously' [File: Mark Baker/AP]

Wellington, July 29 (RHC)-- At least a dozen schools across New Zealand have received bomb threats that caused widespread disruption amid suggestions of a possible cyberattack from overseas.

Many of the schools affected – located in the regions of Ashburton, Dunstan, Geraldine, Greymouth, Kaikoura, Levin, Masterton, Queenstown, Rolleston, Takaka, Palmerston North and Whanganui – were either locked down or evacuated as a result.

Cherie Taylor-Patel, president of New Zealand's Principals' Federation, told public broadcaster Radio New Zealand (RNZ) she had spoken to the Ministry of Education about the developments.

"The ministry has said that their understanding is that this was actually a cyberbot coming in from overseas," Taylor-Patel said. "Today's incidents were really unexpected, unprovoked and really distressing for those communities involved," she added. "It's not something that anyone is prepared for and it's something that no one wants to have happen."

The New Zealand Police said in a statement it did "not believe there is a safety risk" linked to the calls but that it was taking the threats "extremely seriously." Officers "were making enquiries to determine the source of the hoax calls", the force said.

There have been no reports to date of any explosive devices being found at any of the institutions targeted by the calls. Assistant Commissioner Bruce O'Brien told RNZ police were looking into the possibility the threats were coming from overseas.

He provided no further information on whether the calls had contained demands, such as for money, but said they were threatening enough to leave schools with no option but to take them seriously.

A number of the schools affected said they believed the threats were pre-recorded, but the principal of Awatapu College, in Palmerston North, said he believed the call received by the institution was made by "someone actually on the other end of the line."

"It appears to not have been an automated phone call and at that point in time, we weren't aware of other schools being involved," Gary Yeatman told RNZ. "My understanding is it was just to say there was a bomb on site and it was going to be detonated. We weren't given a location within the grounds, we weren't given a time," he added.

In a similar incident in 2016, more than 30 schools across the country received calls that played a recorded message threatening live bombs on school grounds.

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