

Kurdish protesters express outrage in Australia

Mike Head
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Scores of Kurdish people and supporters demonstrated at Greek consulates in Sydney and Melbourne on Wednesday, voicing their outrage at the Greek government's role in the abduction of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan. Within hours of news being posted on the Internet of Ocalan's seizure by Turkish agents, plans were drawn up by Kurdish organisations for protests in both cities, where most of Australia's 12,000 Kurdish refugees live.

In Sydney some 70 people broke into the building housing the consulate at 12.30 am, while others demonstrated in solidarity on the street, chanting, singing, dancing and waving demands for Ocalan's immediate release and for Kurdish self-determination. Their main chant was "Shame on Greece". During the ensuing nine-hour siege, two young people doused themselves with petrol and threatened to self-immolate.

After initially apparently being caught off-guard, the state and federal police mobilised at least 150 heavily-armed and helmeted members of "anti-terrorist" units, including the state riot squad, accompanied by dogs and brandishing extended batons. Despite earlier assurances, police commanders refused to allow the Kurdish occupiers to speak to the assembled media to explain their demands. On several occasions police with riot shields and oxygen masks, backed by paddy wagons, moved into position to storm the building, in manoeuvres designed to intimidate and provoke the participants. Police chiefs later described these as "cat and mouse" procedures.

Kurdish negotiators agreed to end the protest at 10 am, whereupon the demonstrators left the building with fists raised in victory salutes. Police arrested 65 people, including one 15-year-old boy. After being held for several hours without access to lawyers they were each charged with unlawful assembly at a protected place.

Other charges are reportedly being prepared.

In Melbourne about 70 people protested vigorously outside the consulate from 9 am. They wore scarves in the red, yellow and green colours of the Kurdish flag and carried placards saying, "Yesterday Vietnam, today Kurdistan" and "Freedom for Ocalan". In the midst of a peaceful rally, they were suddenly charged and attacked by police on horseback when police said two petrol cans were spotted in the crowd. In the resulting scuffles, police horses trampled several people and three were arrested.

With Prime Minister John Howard in the vanguard, the mass media, the state and federal governments and official immigrant organisations instigated a witchhunt against those taking part, depicting them as "terrorists" who had "embarked on an orchestrated campaign of violence". Howard claimed that all Australians condemned protests that were not "in accordance with the law". Bob Carr, the Labor Party Premier of the state of New South Wales, declared that it was not "the Australian way" to allow overseas grievances to be aired within the country. One newspaper carried a front-page photograph of a young man threatening to douse himself with petrol, saying he had "brought the unfamiliar face of terrorism to the heart of Sydney".

In none of these utterances was there the slightest condemnation of the Turkish seizure of the Kurdish leader or the years of repression suffered by the Kurdish people at the hands of the Western powers and the Turkish, Iraqi, Syrian and Iranian regimes. Instead, the very act of political protest was labelled as terrorism. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, regarded as a liberal newspaper, was one of the most explicit in this regard. It ran a front-page headline denouncing the demonstrators as "global mobile terrorists" on the grounds that Kurds worldwide coordinated their

protests using mobile phones. The Sydney *Daily Telegraph*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, editorialised that Australians should "feel a sense of outrage" at the actions of the Kurdish "extremists". It urged the courts to punish them "to the fullest extent of the law".

The events have also been used to demand a further boosting of police and intelligence services, particularly in the lead-up to next year's Sydney Olympics. The media claimed that a "security lapse" occurred because state police in Sydney were not notified of, or did not act on, an alert issued by the Protective Security Coordinating Centre, about the likelihood of protests directed against the Greek consulates. The PSCC, a Canberra control room run by the federal police, the political police of ASIO and ASIS, the military and the National Crime Authority, claimed that it tried to alert its state equivalent, the NSW Protective Security Group, but could not contact it.

This sparked media and police calls for increased patrols of diplomatic offices and for a review of the plans drawn up to deal with "international terrorism" during the Olympics. What is meant by terrorism was inadvertently specified by an editorial in *The Australian*, when it equated the expression of dissident views with terrorism.

It said the failure of the anti-terrorist agencies to protect the Sydney consulate should "ring loud alarm bells for security chiefs" because "the Sydney Olympics will undoubtedly provide a potential international stage for any number of dissident views".



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