

Huge security buildup for Sydney Olympics

Mike Head
14 March 2000

As the Sydney Olympics draws near, details have been made public of the extensive buildup of security forces that will blanket all venues and significant parts of the city during both the Paralympics and the Olympic Games in September and October.

Up to 5,000 military personnel, as well as armoured vehicles and Black Hawk helicopters, will be deployed at the Games, including all of Australia's Special Forces. In addition there will be thousands of New South Wales state police, hundreds of Federal Police, scores of intelligence officers, 30,000 private security guards and tens of thousands of Olympic volunteers with powers to search, remove and detain people. Security and intelligence agencies from other countries will also be active, including armed US and Israeli officers. US warships will be stationed off the coast.

Over the past 18 months, rehearsals have included helicopter missions across the city and throughout the main Homebush Bay site, the mock storming of jumbo jets at Sydney airport, and the boarding of ships in the harbour. Sydney residents, and people travelling to and from the city, are already under police and intelligence surveillance.

Various groups have declared their intention to stage political demonstrations during the Games, highlighting issues such as the enormous financial cost, corruption and profit-making associated with the event; the social impact in terms of soaring rents, homelessness and budget cuts; and the continuing oppression of Aboriginal people. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, security sources are also concerned that anger over the high prices and lack of availability of tickets may also lead to protests.

The Olympics security operation is setting three precedents that have far-reaching implications for freedom of expression and other basic democratic rights. First, sweeping powers to stop protests are being extended to police and others across the metropolitan area. Secondly, preparations are being made for the extensive use of the military for internal policing. Thirdly, foreign military and security personnel will operate unilaterally in Sydney, with or without the cooperation of their Australian counterparts.

NSW police chief Peter Ryan has sought to justify the security buildup by describing the Sydney Olympics as "an almost irresistible magnet to terrorist groups". Other security commanders, however, have rated the danger of terrorism as low.

Regardless of these differences, Olympic authorities, police and military officers have bluntly stated their determination to prevent the Games from being disrupted in any form. "A warning to anybody who wants to interfere with the Olympic Games: we will interfere with them," Brigadier Philip McNamara, the Special Forces commander, told a luncheon gathering of current and former military officers on February 29. "We are prepared to meet any challenge."

These authorities are anxious to protect the multi-billion dollar commercial interests of the sponsors, advertisers and authorised media outlets. "The intent is very clearly there to make sure there is as much

legislative clout to protect the operations of the Games and the key stakeholders," Olympic Co-ordination Authority director-general David Richmond told a conference of Olympic sponsors on February 29.

The state government intends to pass the Olympic Arrangements Act by May. It will extend to all Olympic sites, and public spaces in the city and harbour foreshore, the powers already given to the Olympic Co-ordination Authority under the 1999 Homebush Bay Operations Act, which covers the main venue. That Act allows the Authority to appoint "authorised persons" or "enforcement officers" with powers exceeding those held by police.

Neither the Act nor the regulations issued under it specify any qualifications for the appointment of these persons. Yet they can:

- * use "reasonable force" to remove people
- * prevent the distribution of any material
- * stop the use of any camera, recording or broadcasting equipment
- * ban anyone from areas under their control
- * search people and their possessions
- * demand names and addresses and proof of identity
- * photograph alleged offenders
- * seize property
- * issue on-the-spot fines of up to \$200.

These appointees may or may not be in uniform; they will simply carry an ID card, to be shown on request. They will have wide scope for exercising their powers. Under the regulations, it is an offence for anyone to:

- * walk or drive a vehicle in any area blocked off by barriers
- * use "indecent, obscene, insulting or threatening language"
- * behave in "an offensive or indecent" manner
- * cause "serious alarm or affront" to any person by disorderly conduct
- * obstruct a person
 - * fail to comply with a reasonable request or direction by an authorised person
 - * cause "annoyance or inconvenience"
 - * possess liquor or be intoxicated (in the opinion of an authorised person)
 - * sell or hire goods or services.

In part, these powers and offences are aimed at street vendors and ticket scalpers, whose activities could threaten Games profits. But they are also designed to deal with any protests. They go beyond those that police use regularly to harass, provoke, "move on" or arrest people on public streets, particularly youth and political demonstrators. Moreover, the Act shields both the Authority and its appointed officers from legal liability for nuisance.

Among the public places affected will be Bondi Beach, where beach volleyball will be played; Darling Harbour foreshore, where various events are scheduled; Sydney Harbour, the venue for yachting;

Centennial Park, Randwick and Bankstown, where road cycling will be held; and the Nepean River at Penrith, where canoeing and rowing will take place.

One senior police officer involved in Games security, Inspector David Darcy has warned that police may react violently to silent or non-violent protests in the lead-up to the Olympics. His threat came in a letter to the Olympic Impact Coalition, an organisation of groups campaigning against the social costs of the Olympics, in which Darcy insisted that police must be notified in advance of any protest actions.

Three legal and civil liberties groups, the NSW Law Society, the Council for Civil Liberties and the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, have opposed aspects of the new laws. Law Society president John North accused the government of having a “deep-seated fear [that] there might be backlashes from protests and other things”. Yet he merely urged the government to confine the powers to defined venues and to police and trained security officers, arguing that the wider operation could backfire by fuelling resentment against the Games.

International, federal and state authorities are preparing for disorder that the police, security guards and other “enforcement officers” cannot control. In his February 29 luncheon address to the Royal United Service Institution, Brigadier McNamara said the bulk of the military's Special Forces would be on 24-hour, 10-minute notice at four sites in Sydney from mid-August until after the Paralympics.

Soldiers from the Special Air Service Regiment (SAS), the 4th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment and the reserve 1st Commando Company would be stationed in Sydney, he said. Most would be accommodated 15 kilometres from the main Olympic stadium, at Holsworthy Barracks in Sydney's south-west, where helicopter gunships would be on standby to carry troops into action. Special forces would be located in Sydney Harbour at the Garden Island Navy Base and the nearby former School of Artillery at North Head, and at the Richmond airforce base, on Sydney's northern outskirts.

The military operations could be far-flung. The armed forces have identified 115 places across Sydney, as well as Games-related venues in other parts of the country, as possible sites for “terrorism”.

McNamara commands the operation, codenamed Operation Gold, reporting to the newly-appointed head of land command, Major-General Peter Cosgrove, who recently led the Interfet occupation of East Timor. The total size of the Olympic deployment equals that of the Timor intervention. Only one army brigade will be left available for other military purposes.

Special procedures will allow for the military to be called in at several minutes' notice, by-passing the normal constitutional arrangements needed for the state government, which runs the police, and the federal government, which has jurisdiction over the military, to agree on the domestic use of the armed forces.

Until now the invoking of “military aid to the civil power” has been a rare event, confined, at least as far as is known publicly, to national emergencies, such as floods, cyclones and earthquakes, or acute political crises. The last political emergency occurred in 1975, when the Governor-General placed the armed forces on alert after dismissing the Whitlam government. No troops were seen on the streets, however.

“Terrorism” has been invoked only once before as the pretext for military involvement. In 1978 Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and NSW Premier Neville Wran called out 1,900 soldiers in Sydney and nearby Bowral after a bomb exploded outside a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting at Sydney's Hilton Hotel.

That bombing had all the hallmarks of a provocation staged by the

Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and the NSW Police Special Branch. Twice, police framed-up political activists for the bombing, but the convictions were later overturned. As a direct result of the bomb blast, ASIO's powers were greatly boosted, the Federal Police was established, the SAS was formed, “anti-terrorist” and SWAT squads were created in every state police force and Crisis Policy Centres were set up.

These Crisis Policy Centres will direct military and intelligence operations during the Olympics. They are police-military nerve centres, run by the Protective Security Co-ordination Centre, which includes representatives of the Prime Minister's National Security Council, the Office of National Assessments, ASIO and ASIS (the external intelligence service), the military and the federal and state police.

Despite these arrangements, both the US and Israel will have their own security and military forces on hand. A US aircraft carrier, probably the USS Abraham Lincoln, will cruise in international waters near Sydney, accompanied by a destroyer and submarine. Helicopter-borne soldiers and Navy Seals will be equipped to respond to any “terrorists”. FBI officers are already in Sydney and were to be joined by military liaison officers this year. US officials and Israeli security personnel will be permitted to carry guns.

Legally, US President Bill Clinton, who is planning to attend the Olympics, would have to obtain permission from Prime Minister John Howard before deploying US forces on Australian soil. But an Australian government source told the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* last December: “The reality is the US will act alone if necessary. We should be prepared to act together, but if United States' interests or people are threatened, the world's policeman will go it alone.”

There are already signs that “terrorist” scares will be used to accustom public opinion to a large-scale police-military presence during the Games. Last week a Turkish immigrant worker from Sydney's west was arrested and charged with threatening to destroy planes carrying athletes from the US, France, Britain and Israel to the Olympics. The week before, Australian intelligence agencies suddenly informed the media that they had identified groups linked to Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden as a threat to the Games. Both stories were afforded front-page treatment.

Closer scrutiny suggests a twofold agenda. In the first place, the security operation is designed to silence those planning to protest during the Games. Secondly, it will set a precedent and provide extensive practice for the future use of “military aid to the civil power” as social tensions in Australia continue to deepen.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact