

Washington seizes on Bali terror bombing to demand crackdown in Indonesia

Peter Symonds
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A devastating bomb blast late on Saturday night in the Kuta Beach tourist area of the Indonesian island of Bali has killed at least 187 people and injured more than 300. No one has claimed responsibility for the carnage, but Washington and Canberra have both been quick to point the finger at Islamic fundamentalist groups allegedly linked to Al Qaeda and to step up the pressure on Indonesia to take tougher measures to suppress their activities.

While details are still incomplete, it appears that two bombs were involved: the first was a small device that exploded outside Paddy's Irish Pub; the second was a huge car bomb which detonated shortly afterwards outside the nearby Sari Club. The blast ripped through the nightclub, causing gas cylinders used for cooking to explode and the roof to collapse. Hundreds of patrons struggled to escape the burning debris.

The explosions, which occurred around 11.30 pm, were timed to cause maximum casualties. No prior warning was given and the Sari Club was packed with mainly young tourists, who were trapped in the inferno created by the blast. The official death toll may rise further as teams of investigators pick through the charred remains of the building. Such was the force of the second bomb that at least 20 nearby buildings suffered extensive damage and windows were broken more than 100 metres from the site. A third bomb exploded shortly afterwards outside the US consulate in the nearby area of Sanur but no one was injured.

Whoever carried out the attack and whatever the motive, it was a callous and criminal action aimed at killing and maiming innocent civilians. Bali is a popular and inexpensive destination for tourists from around the world, particularly from Australia. Most of the patrons in the Sari Club were young people—backpackers, footballers enjoying end-of-season festivities, surf enthusiasts and other holidaymakers—out for a night on the town. The

difficult process of identifying the victims has just begun, but so far the official list of those killed includes 13 Australians, seven Indonesians as well as young people from Sweden, Singapore, France, Germany, Britain, Holland and Ecuador.

US President Bush immediately seized on the bombings to justify his administration's "war on terrorism." "The world must confront this global menace, terrorism," he said. Australian Prime Minister John Howard called for stronger action by Jakarta: "We would like to see a maximum effort on the part of the Indonesian government to deal with the terrorist problem within their own borders. It's been a problem for a long time."

US ambassador to Indonesia Ralph Boyce declared that it was not yet possible to pin the attack on Al Qaeda but added: "In recent weeks, we have been able to put an end to a year of speculation as to whether Al Qaeda might be in Indonesia, or relocating to Indonesia." Citing various unnamed US officials and so-called anti-terrorist experts, the international media has quickly identified Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and its alleged leader Abu Bakar Bashir as the chief suspect.

For months, the US administration has been demanding that Indonesian president Megawati Sukarnoputri take tougher measures against Islamic extremist groups based in Indonesia—in particular JI and Bashir. Based on information extracted from suspects arrested in Singapore, the Philippines and Malaysia, the CIA alleges that JI was involved in plotting to attack US and Western facilities in South East Asia last December and again to coincide with September 11 anniversary.

US ambassador Boyce has been lobbying the Megawati administration and moderate Islamic groups for action to shut down JI, which allegedly has links to other terrorist groups in the region. His overtures, however, have been consistently rebuffed. Jakarta has refused to arrest Bashir, insisting that there is no evidence against him. Only last

week, the US threatened to withdraw some of its diplomats unless the police took further steps to investigate a grenade explosion outside an unoccupied US embassy home in Jakarta last month. Senior police officials say that the explosion was not aimed at the US.

It is certainly possible that JI or another Islamic extremist group was responsible for the Bali bombing. The US invasion of Afghanistan and its plans for a war against Iraq have provoked widespread hostility in Indonesia and created conditions for such groups to extend their influence. But no conclusive proof has yet been offered.

In fact, the broader US allegations against Bashir and the JI rest on “evidence” provided by suspects detained in Singapore, Malaysia and Afghanistan—all held incommunicado and without trial. The chief source is a 31-year-old Kuwaiti, Omar al-Faruq, who was detained by Indonesian police in June, handed over to the US and shipped to Afghanistan where he was interrogated for months by the CIA.

Bashir himself has denied any involvement in the Bali attack and accused the US of being responsible. “It would be impossible for Indonesians to do it,” he told a press conference on Sunday. “Indonesians don’t have such powerful explosives. I think maybe the US are behind the bombings because they always say Indonesia is part of a terrorist network.”

While it is unlikely that Washington was directly involved, the explosion was far more powerful than any previously seen in Indonesia. It indicates a high level of technical expertise and planning, and points to the possible involvement of the Indonesian armed forces (TNI). Even if the TNI were not directly responsible, sections of the military have close connections with Islamic fundamentalist groups, such as Laskar Jihad, and are widely accused of supporting their sectarian violence in the Maluku and Sulawesi.

Wimar Witoelar, an Indonesian commentator and spokesman for former president Abdurrahman Wahid, has openly accused the military of carrying out the attack in Bali. “The plot is probably hatched by hardline military rogues as impatient as many are with Megawati, but coming from the right flank. This is certainly an excuse for the entry of a military takeover. Unless it is pre-empted.”

A move against Megawati is, however, only one of the possible motives for the TNI involvement in the outrage. At the very least, the Bali bombings will enable the military to argue for a greater role in providing internal

security. In the aftermath of the attack, the TNI has stepped up security around major mining, oil and gas projects operated by transnational corporations in Indonesia.

The willingness of the military to use such brutal methods is by no means far fetched. All the latest evidence points to the direct involvement of elite Kopassus forces in orchestrating an attack in late August on employees of the giant US-owned Freeport gold and copper mine in West Papua, which resulted in the deaths of two American teachers and an Indonesian employee.

Moreover, sections of the TNI have been keen to resume close ties with the US and view Bush’s “war against terrorism” as the means for achieving their ends. The incident in Bali provides a convenient pretext for overcoming the objections within Jakarta to acceding to US demands for a crackdown on Islamic groups.

Whether the TNI was responsible or not, the tragedy in Bali was a politically reactionary act that plays directly into Washington’s hands. Just hours before the blast, various groups in Indonesia had denounced US threats to withdraw diplomatic personnel. Previously Muslim leaders had dismissed Washington’s claims of Al Qaeda involvement in Indonesia as “propaganda tricks”.

At the very least, while the Bush administration has now gained Jakarta’s approval to send an FBI team to Bali to join the investigations, Canberra has dispatched personnel from the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). Britain has also offered to send investigators. More broadly Washington will use the bombings not only to step up its agenda in Indonesia and South East Asia but also as a justification for further acts of aggression under the banner of the “war against terrorism”.



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