

Anger mounts over Australian government's failure to give Bali warning

Linda Tenenbaum**17 October 2002**

In the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington, the Australian government introduced a series of draconian security measures, arguing that democratic and civil rights needed to be sacrificed in order to protect the Australian population from terrorism. More than a billion dollars was allocated in last May's budget to beefing up the country's security and intelligence agencies. Hundreds of millions more have been spent policing the country's borders against innocent refugees, all in the name of safeguarding the lives of Australia's citizens.

Last Saturday's horrific bomb blasts in Bali have exposed the fraud of these claims. At least 180 are dead, possibly many more, and hundreds have suffered appalling injuries. Ordinary working people throughout Australia have had their families torn apart and their lives shattered. But it turns out that the young holidaymakers, newlyweds, sporting club members and families enjoying Saturday night festivities at the Sari Club in Kuta Beach could have been warned to stay away.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Howard was forced to admit that the country's intelligence agencies had been given prior information that terror attacks could take place in tourist locations throughout Indonesia, including Bali. But, despite the fact that Bali is one of the most popular destinations for Australian tourists—at any one time, the small island hosts some 20,000 Australians—the government, through the Department of Foreign Affairs, chose not to make the information public.

Details of the intelligence first emerged in the *Washington Post* on Tuesday, three days after the bombing. The newspaper reported that the CIA had identified threats to attack a tourist site in Indonesia, mentioning Bali as well as a number of other locations.

On the basis of the CIA's warnings, the US government updated its travel advice to US citizens twice after September 20, specifically warning them to "avoid large gatherings known to cater primarily to Western clientele including certain bars, restaurants and tourist areas."

No location in Indonesia could have fitted this description more perfectly than the Sari Club in Kuta. Not only was it well known as a favorite nightclub for Western tourists, particularly Australians, it had a policy of refusing entry to locals.

The Australian government, however, failed to update its advice. From September 20, Australian tourists were told by the Department of Foreign Affairs that there was an "ongoing risk of terrorist activity" in West Timor, Maluku, North Maluka, Aceh, Sulawesi and Papua. But the only reference to Bali was that "tourist services are operating normally."

Immediately after the terror attack, the government insisted it had done everything possible to alert Australian travelers about the potential dangers. On Monday, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said he was "satisfied" that the September 20 advice constituted an "appropriate" warning.

"We had no advance warning of this particular incident or else we would have moved heaven and Earth to stop people going to Bali at all," the minister stressed.

Inside parliament, Howard declared that the government had received intelligence about a "general threat" environment, but nothing that pointed to possible attacks in Bali.

When news of the CIA warnings emerged, Howard initially tried to maintain the cover-up. Along with other members of cabinet and US Ambassador Tom Schieffer, he continued to assert that he was unaware of

any such intelligence.

Late on Tuesday he told the media that the US report “hasn’t been brought to my attention, no. We had no warning of the specific attack that occurred. There have been general warnings about the deteriorating security position, the deteriorating terrorist position in Indonesia.”

But by Wednesday, this position had become untenable. Addressing a hushed parliament, the prime minister admitted that the CIA’s warnings had, indeed, been passed on to Australian intelligence agencies. “This intelligence was assessed and the view was formed that no alteration in the threat assessment level was warranted,” he said.

While maintaining that this “view” was entirely justified, and that his government’s travel advice had been “adequate,” Howard nevertheless felt obliged to announce an inquiry into the handling of all intelligence relating to the Bali bombing.

What findings can be expected from a government inquiry was foreshadowed by Downer, when, in reply to a question on the ABC’s *7.30 Report*, he insisted that the Department of Foreign Affairs had done “a good job.”

A former regimental intelligence officer with the Australian army in East Timor, Andrew Plunkett, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that, given the intelligence that was available, the failure to make a more specific warning constituted “another tragic intelligence failure” in the Department of Foreign Affairs.

“I’ve seen it happen where diligent intelligence officers pass on significant information on activity in Indonesia that is later hosed down and wordsmithed... for political purposes. They water down the intelligence so as not to upset the Indonesians and because they place the narrow short-term business interests of Australian companies in Indonesia ahead of human security...”

Distressed relatives of the victims have angrily condemned the government. Arriving back in Australia after traveling to Bali on the day of the attack, one woman exclaimed: “I want someone to ask John Howard why we weren’t told that there was a threat. Bali was dangerous. Other nationalities knew that. We got on that plane in the morning. We should have been told.”

The reason why she wasn’t told is that the “war

against terrorism” has never had anything whatsoever to do with defending the interests, aspirations and lives of ordinary working people—in Australia, the United States or anywhere else in the world.

On the anniversary of September 11, the Howard government responded with great haste and urgency to intelligence reports that some of its embassies in the Asia Pacific region could be targeted. Several embassies were immediately shut down and substantial additional security was brought in to protect them. Other recent alleged threats concerning power generation facilities inside Australia received a similar reaction and were widely publicised by the government.

The starkly different approach to warnings over Bali underscores the real agenda behind Howard’s support for the “war against terrorism”: to bolster the apparatus of the state, roll back basic democratic rights and strengthen the government’s military alliance with the US—as the best means for prosecuting the political and economic interests of Australia’s ruling elite at home and throughout the Asia Pacific region.



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