

After the Bali bombing:

Washington and Canberra push for military ties with Indonesia

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Six days after bomb blasts killed at least 180 people and injured more than 300 others on the Indonesian island of Bali, none of the basic questions as to how and why the attack was carried out have been answered. Yet, despite the lack of evidence, the Bush administration and the Australian government have both blamed Al Qaeda for the attack, demanded Jakarta crack down on its alleged affiliate in South East Asia—Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)—and used the tragedy to forge new links with the Indonesian military.

Details of what happened in the Kuta Beach area of Bali late last Saturday remain sketchy. Much of what has appeared in the international and Indonesian media—particularly in relation to who was responsible for the atrocity—amounts to little more than rumour and speculation.

Even the number of people killed is unclear. The official death toll is currently 183, many of whom have yet to be identified. But a report in the British-based *Guardian* indicated that the final count may be far higher. A volunteer at Bali's mortuary told the newspaper that the figure included only numbered corpses but did not include two large piles of small bags containing the multiple remains from an unknown number of bodies. She estimated that once DNA testing had been done, the toll would rise by 100.

What is known is that two bombs exploded at around 11.30 pm in the heart of the nightclub area of the Kuta Beach tourist district. The first device exploded outside Paddy's Irish Pub in Legian Street and a second, much larger car bomb shortly after outside the nearby Sari Club. The bomb laid waste to the Sari Club as well as other buildings and vehicles in the area and left behind a large crater.

The only significant detail to emerge so far is the type of explosive used in the bombs. Police chief Bachtiar announced on Tuesday that traces of C-4—a high-power, plastic explosive manufactured in several countries, primarily the US, and commonly used by the military—had been found at the scene. The explosives were packed into a Mitsubishi minivan and triggered either by a timer or by remote control.

Bachtiar announced that two men were being “intensively” interrogated in relation to the bombing. One was a guard who witnessed the attack. The other was the relative of a man whose identity card was found at the scene of the blast. Neither has been formally arrested or declared a suspect. Why they have been singled out from the dozens of people interviewed by police has not been explained.

Beyond that the picture is vague. The Indonesian armed forces (TNI) denied allegations published in the *International Herald Tribune* on Wednesday that a former air force officer had confessed to building the bomb. The police interrogated Lieutenant Colonel Dedy Masrukhin, who received training in handling explosives in the US and was discharged last year over his involvement in a drug case. Conflicting police statements have been issued over his involvement.

Several articles based on high-level, anonymous police and intelligence sources state that investigators are seeking to track down a group of seven or eight men. The most specific, appearing in yesterday's *Jakarta Post*, claimed that seven foreigners led by a Yemeni and a Malaysian had entered Indonesia through Semarang in Central Java where they prepared the explosives then proceeded via Surakarta to Bali. The story has not been officially confirmed, however.

None of the information released so far supports the allegations made by Washington and Canberra that the bombing was carried out by terrorists associated with Al Qaeda or JI. As Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer admitted, officials still “don't have any hard evidence as to who is responsible” for the explosion. But Prime Minister John Howard has already called for JI to be placed on the UN list of terrorist organisations—a move which the British government has also indicated it is considering.

The Australian government dispatched a team of ministers and officials to Indonesia, including Foreign Minister Downer, to pressure the administration of President Megawati Sukarnoputri to crack down on JI and to co-operate more closely with Australian intelligence, police and military. After meeting with Megawati on Wednesday, Downer announced the establishment of a new Australian-Indonesian security team to combat terrorism.

In an unprecedented move, Downer indicated that Australia and Indonesia would carry out a joint investigation of the Bali bombings. A small army of police, forensic experts and intelligence agents from Australia, the US, France, Britain, Germany and Japan is already present on Bali. Previously their role had been described as one of providing technical assistance to Indonesian investigators.

Australia has by far the largest contingent with at least 46 personnel drawn from the Australian Federal Police, state police forces and other agencies. Joint control over the investigation makes clear that Australian police are not simply assisting their Indonesian counterparts but have the ability to steer the inquiry in the direction desired by Canberra. The presence of agents from the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the country's internal spy agency, is a further indication of the political nature of the Bali investigations.

Downer has welcomed Megawati's decision to proclaim an emergency presidential decree that will give the police and military draconian new powers to detain and interrogate terrorist suspects for lengthy periods without trial. Both Canberra and Washington have been pressing Jakarta for some time to detain the alleged JI leader Abu Bakar Bashir, who is referred to in the international media as the prime suspect in the Bali bombings. Bashir has vigorously denied any responsibility and Indonesian police have previously insisted that there is no evidence of his involvement in terrorist activities.

Moreover, JI is a loose network of Islamic extremists rather than a tightly knit organisation or a military-style group. A detailed analysis of the “Ngruki Network”—a reference to the Islamic school founded by Bashir—published in August by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group concluded: “Association with the Ngruki network is not equivalent to terrorism, and yet the possibility remains that some members of the exile group who have since returned to Indonesia may be sources of support for criminal activities.”

Australian academic Dr Greg Fealy commented that JI’s apparent links to Al Qaeda remain at best circumstantial. “The JI is the latest manifestation of a long tradition of minority violence within the Indonesian Islamic community in Indonesia,” he said. “As yet, we have not seen conclusive proof that they are a terrorist organisation. Abu Bashir has clearly got contacts with a lot of people who are doing suspicious things, and there are suspicious things about Bashir himself, but it’s a long way short of proof.”

It is certainly possible that JI, or figures associated with the network including Bashir, may have had a hand in the Bali bombings. But that does not explain why the US and Australian governments, along with the international press, have focused attention almost entirely on JI and Bashir to the exclusion of other possibilities, including Islamic fundamentalist militia, the Indonesian military, or a combination of both.

Political motivations lie behind the push to attribute the atrocity to Al Qaeda and JI. Bush immediately added the Bali bombings to a list of alleged Al Qaeda terrorist acts, including an attack on US troops in Kuwait and an explosion aboard a French oil tanker in Yemen. He used the recent attacks to justify a war against Iraq, declaring it was part of the war on terrorism.

Within Indonesia, Washington, backed by Canberra, has been pressing for months to re-establish close ties with the military as part of its drive to boost the US presence within the region. The tragedy in Bali has been seized upon as an ideal means for strengthening ties with the TNI under the guise of fighting terrorism.

The effort would backfire, however, if it is found that the military, or groups related to it, had a role in the Bali bombings. The sophisticated way in which the attack was carried out, the use of C-4 explosive and the police interrogation of a former air force officer just as readily point to the TNI as to Al Qaeda or other terrorist organisations. Moreover, the military has a history of repression and dirty tricks as well as long associations both with Islamic extremists and outright criminal elements who have been used as its proxies.

Several analysts have pointed to possible military involvement in the events in Bali. Australian author and academic Dr Merle Ricklefs told the press: “It [the bombing] would probably have needed some collaboration with elements of the security forces and with shonky business people prepared to give them money.” The Indonesian army was among the few conceivable beneficiaries from the Bali attack, Ricklefs commented, strengthening the case of some of its leaders that it alone can rein in anarchy and run the country.

Commentator Brian Toohey wrote in the *Australian Financial Review*: “Only a little over two years ago, elements of the Indonesian military, were encouraging the Islamic extremists to attack Christians in the Malukus, in an attempt to undermine the then-president Abdurrahman Wahid. The possibility of some degree of implicit military approval in the Bali bombings can’t be entirely ruled out.” He noted that the Islamic extremist militia Laskar Jihad, which was involved in the sectarian fighting in the Malukus and Sulawesi, “now has tacit military approval for its attacks on independence supporters in Papua province.”

Yet the announcement earlier this week by Laskar Jihad that it intended to end its military activities and disband its militia passed virtually unnoticed in the press. The group has denied its decision had anything to do with the attack in Bali or that it was under pressure from the

Indonesian military to take a lower profile. But virtually no one has pointed out that Laskar Jihad has the motive and means for carrying out the attack in Bali because to do so would immediately raise questions about TNI involvement.

Under the banner of the “war on terrorism,” the US and Australia have already been moving to reforge ties with the Indonesian military, broken off in 1999 following its backing for pro-Indonesian militia in East Timor and their rampage against supporters of independence.

During his visit to Jakarta in August, US Secretary of State Colin Powell announced a \$50 million, three-year anti-terrorism package for the Indonesian military and police. As part of the package, he announced that \$400,000 would be allocated to restart an exchange program to provide training for high-level Indonesian officers. The significance of the proposal is not the small sum of money involved but rather that the program would be the first step in overturning the present Congressional ban on the provision of training and equipment to the Indonesian armed forces.

The concerted efforts of the Bush administration to resume the close ties that the US enjoyed with the military apparatus for three decades under Suharto marks a shift from the policies of the previous administration. Under Clinton, the US exploited the Asian economic crisis of 1997-87 to press for an end to so-called crony capitalism and any barriers to US investment in the region in particular. In Indonesia, the US supported the removal of Suharto when it became clear that he would not implement the IMF restructuring agenda and that his presence was provoking growing opposition.

The Bush administration has insisted that Indonesia continue the economic reforms that have deepened its economic and social crisis. At the same time, Washington has been concerned over the ability of Jakarta to prevent political instability and the fragmentation of a country that is crucial to US strategic and economic interests in the region. Over the last two years, Washington has sought to revive its links to the TNI and to bolster the military’s position in Indonesia. The US has studiously ignored the TNI’s role in supporting the ouster of former president Abdurrahman Wahid by Megawati last year and its subsequent repression of separatist movements in Aceh and West Papua.

The policy shift in Washington is underlined by the change of guard in the US embassy in Jakarta. In September last year, the Bush administration appointed Ralph Boyce, a top-level career diplomatic with long experience in Asia, to replace Clinton appointee Robert Gelbard as US ambassador. During his testimony to the Congressional hearings on his appointment, Boyce emphasised the danger of political instability and social disarray in Indonesia. He warned that the fragmentation of the Indonesian state would be “a disaster for regional stability” and called for closer ties with the TNI which, he said, “remains a central, truly national institution.”

Over the last month, Boyce has been waging an extraordinary political campaign in Jakarta to garner support from the Megawati administration and other political parties, including Muslim organisations, for the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism”. In the wake of the Bali bombings, his push for tougher anti-terrorist measures and US links to the TNI will only intensify.

The Howard government, which has backed the Bush administration’s policy to the hilt, is also moving to resume close contacts with the TNI. According to an article in the *Daily Telegraph*, Australia’s elite SAS troops “will resume counter-terrorism training for Indonesia’s feared Kopassus special forces” as part of the anti-terrorism task force agreed in Jakarta this week between Downer and Megawati. The newspaper even claimed that the training had already begun. “It’s been going on slowly and quietly for a while,” one government source said.

In answer to questions in parliament, Defence Minister Robert Hill denied that the Australian military had been training Kopassus troops but

did not rule out the possibility that the issue had been agreed in Jakarta. "It may well be in Australia's interest to develop the relationship with Kopassus as it relates to counter-terrorism activities. But it has not progressed to the situation of training as yet," he declared.

The reason for Hill's reticence is obvious. Training for the Kopassus forces makes clear that the real purpose of closer US and Australian links to the TNI is not to combat terrorism but to strengthen the military as a key means for suppressing growing political and social unrest in Indonesia. Under Suharto, Kopassus was notorious for its use of kidnapping, torture and murder to suppress separatist movements in Aceh, East Timor and Papua along with any political opposition to the dictatorship.

Kopassus did not change its spots following the fall of Suharto in 1998. Its units are currently spearheading the military operations directed at suppressing separatist movements in Aceh and Papua. Earlier in the year, six Kopassus soldiers, including its local regional commander, were charged with the murder last November of a prominent Papuan leader, Theys Eluay. Evidence is also mounting that the same unit was involved in an attack on employees of the US-owned Freeport mine in Papua that resulted in the deaths of two Americans and an Indonesian.

Washington and Canberra are both seeking to exploit the Bali bombings to forge new ties with the Indonesian military and to push their interests in the region.



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