

Anti-war protests begin in Asia-Pacific

Our correspondents
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Recent protests against the planned US invasion of Iraq indicate a growing level of opposition to the war throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Newspaper opinion polls suggest a marked shift in public sentiment since the last assault on Iraq in 1991.

The largest protest occurred in Melbourne, Australia last Sunday, when more than 30,000 took to the streets, voicing their opposition to the US war and the unconditional support given to it by Australian Prime Minister John Howard. A sea of banners and placards condemned the Bush and Howard governments, with slogans including “No blood for oil” and “Regime change begins at home”.

The rally, which was called by the Victorian Peace Network, a coalition of 50 student, church, political, trade union and other organisations, attracted many more participants than organisers had anticipated. The numbers were swelled by workers, youth and professional people who joined the protest after hearing of the terror bombing in Bali the night before, intent on demonstrating their concern that the US-led “war against terrorism” would only lead to more such tragedies.

On October 5-6, some 500 demonstrators, including students, parliamentarians and lawyers, rallied outside the Pine Gap joint US-Australian military base near Alice Springs in central Australia. Established in 1968, Pine Gap is a surveillance and satellite relay station that will provide crucial intelligence for the planned strike on Iraq. Northern Territory police blocked access to the base, making repeated and violent attacks on the protestors and arresting 17 people.

A week earlier, on September 28, several thousand people marched through both Melbourne and Sydney, opposing the Howard government’s plans to join any US-led assault. Across the Tasman Sea, protests were held in two major centres in New Zealand on the same day. In Auckland up to 3,000 people demonstrated carrying banners and placards declaring, “No war in Iraq” and demanding the US respect international law. Many watching the march demonstrated their approval by giving

a thumbs up or by clapping.

A range of speakers who condemned US war plans and Israel’s continuing brutal assault on the Palestinians addressed the rally that followed. The speakers included Rotem Dan Mor, a conscientious objector who had been recently jailed for refusing to serve in the Israeli armed forces. Martin Hutt from the Iraqi Medical Alert Support Group said sanctions that had been imposed on Iraq for the past 12 years had caused the deaths of thousands of children and “were themselves a weapon of mass destruction”.

On the same day, about 180 people rallied in Cuba Mall in the centre of Wellington. Leaflets condemning the war were distributed to passersby and the rally was addressed by a series of speakers. Some criticised the NZ unions for failing to take a stand in opposition to the war.

In Indonesia on October 8, more than 200 youth, members of various large Islamic organisations, waved banners outside the US Embassy in Jakarta with messages including “No More Blood.” The demonstrators issued a statement appealing to the American people to ask their government to find a peaceful solution to the Iraq issue.

On the same day, in South Korea, about 50 anti-war activists gathered in front of the US Embassy in Seoul. The protesters, representing 46 civic and religious activist groups, issued a statement saying US plans to attack Iraq could not be justified “and will instead threaten world security”.

Earlier, on October 2, 1,000 students marched in Seoul, condemning the continued presence of 37,000 US troops in South Korea. Chanting “Let’s drive out US troops,” they stomped on two large American flags with skulls drawn on them and carried signs that read: “We oppose US war against Iraq.” Later, 300 students fought 30 policemen who blocked them from breaking through the locked steel gate of the main US military base in Seoul.

The students defied President Kim Dae-Jung who, just hours earlier, had denounced a series of protests against the US military presence. “We must understand that the US military’s presence in the Korean Peninsula is

indispensable for our security, peace on the Korean Peninsula and a balance of forces in northeast Asia,” Kim said.

In a protest that received almost no media coverage, Philippines students demonstrated outside the US Embassy in Manila on October 4, carrying placards such as: “US government No.1 terrorist”.

It was the second recent anti-war protest outside the Manila embassy. On September 27, more than 100 church workers from 22 countries linked arms along the road in front of the building, urging a halt to “US state terrorism” worldwide. Nuns and church leaders held up placards reading “No to US invasion on Iraq” and “Justice, not war” as anti-riot police stood by.

The group issued a statement calling the “war on terror” an “opportunistic use of violence to consolidate and expand US economic, political, cultural and military hegemony” that would undermine human rights and civil liberties of people in targeted countries.

On October 4, about 200 US and other foreign citizens who live in Phnom Penh, Cambodia held a vigil for peace. Under banners reading “War—Not In Our Name!” the participants read a “Not In Our Name” pledge aloud and took signed copies of the pledge to the US Ambassador’s residence.

No anti-war demonstrations have been reported in Malaysia, where the Mahathir government has exploited the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” to suppress its own political opponents, using the notorious Internal Security Act. On October 8, in a sign of the government’s concern about public disquiet, Youth and Sports Minister Hishamuddin Hussein told delegates at the East Asian Economic Summit in Kuala Lumpur that his government was “for the US, if it is a force for good,” but “cannot support the US if it pursues the course of unilateralism with scant regard for world opinion”.

In Japan, polls published in the press have found little public support for strikes against Iraq. The *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper last month reported that its telephone survey found 77 percent of people opposed to a US military attack, with only 14 percent in favour. Asked whether Japan should cooperate with the United States if it began an assault on Baghdad, 69 percent said no, while just 20 percent said yes.

The poll pointed to the contrast between public opinion this time and during past US-led military actions. An October 2001 poll showed 46 percent support for that month’s attack on Afghanistan, with 43 percent opposed. In a February 1991 poll, just after the start of the Gulf

War, 51 percent supported the attack on Iraq with 35 percent opposed.

Newspaper interviews revealed concern that a war will only increase the danger of terrorism. “It’s better if they don’t go to war,” Toshiro Kobayashi, a shopkeeper in Tokyo, said. “It would be one thing if war would solve the problem, but terrorist acts will happen again.”

The mayor of Hiroshima, one of the two Japanese cities obliterated by US atomic bombs in 1945, is currently visiting the United States, urging Washington not to go to war. Interviewed at the commencement of his trip, Tadatashi Akiba called on the US to cut down its nuclear weapons stockpile. This would raise Washington’s credibility in urging other nations to not build their own weapons, he said.

More than 200,000 people in Hiroshima were killed and hundreds of thousands more sickened in the US atomic bombing of the city on August 6, 1945. A second atomic bomb on Nagasaki three days later killed at least 74,000 people. On August 6, addressing 45,000 people at an anniversary commemoration, Akiba warned: “The US government has not been given the right to impose a ‘Pax Americana’ and to decide the fate of the world ... In this environment, only the weak become victims, many of them women, children and the elderly.”

Vietnam, another country subjected to horrific US bombing, has officially protested “against any military activity against Iraq aimed at overthrowing the government of President Saddam Hussein. Interference by external forces to change the political regime of a country constitutes a gross violation of international law and the UN Charter and is unacceptable.” Responding to last week’s US Congress vote to give President Bush full authority to use military force against Iraq, a foreign ministry spokeswoman said the Vietnamese people were “very concerned about this development”.



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