Eye-witness describes violent police raid in Australia

"There is no excuse for terrorising women and children"

Mike Head
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In an unprecedented wave of police raids across Australia, intelligence and federal police officers—some carrying sub-machine guns and wearing military-style combat gear—have forced their way into the homes of dozens of Indonesian-born Muslims since Sunday night, on the pretext of investigating terrorism. The only accusation levelled against those raided was that they attended religious lectures given by Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, during Australian visits in the 1990s. Bashir is reputed to be the leader of the alleged Islamic organisation, Jemaah Islamiah (JI), which the government and the media have accused of responsibility for the October 12 Bali bombings.

Families in at least three major cities, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, have been subjected to the joint raids by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and the Australian Federal Police, conducted under warrants personally authorised by Attorney-General Daryl Williams. According to one media report, at least 20 homes have been raided, but other reports indicate that the number may be significantly higher.

Not a single arrest has been reported, but civil liberties representatives and lawyers have been unable to obtain any information on the full extent of the operation, the precise reasons for the search warrants and whether arrests have been made or charges laid. The government launched the raids immediately after formally banning JI last Sunday night.

Under "counter-terrorism" legislation passed this year with the Labor Party's backing, anyone belonging to JI or any other proscribed group, or found guilty of "supporting," training, funding or recruiting members faces up to 25 years in jail. No evidence has yet been produced to show that JI even exists as a distinct organisation, let alone that it carried out the bombings.

Prime Minister John Howard and other senior ministers have defended the raids and vowed to continue them, despite mounting criticism at home and abroad, particularly in Indonesia. Howard declared that he backed the raids "100 percent" and added: "I find it amazing that people could seriously question the national need for this to happen." Speaking from London, where he held talks with the Blair government on the impending war on Iraq, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer insisted that the government was justified in being "a little ruthless" and "tough" in cracking down on terrorist suspects.

Without offering the slightest proof, Howard and other ministers have repeated the unsubstantiated claims of ASIO director general Dennis Richardson, who made a rare public appearance this week. Richardson told a Canberra conference on "Homeland Security" that Al Qaeda was most likely responsible for the Bali bombings and had "sleeper cells" in Australia. His only "evidence" was statements attributed to Al Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden warning of new terrorist attacks. "We may never know if those statements foreshadowed Bali on the 12 October, but we can be confident that the hand of Al Qaeda is somewhere in that atrocity," Richardson said.

The next day, Howard declared that the raids were conducted because of a "generic concern that there could be sleepers" and officers needed to be armed because "they could meet resistance". By referring to "sleepers" ASIO and the government are claiming the right to conduct such raids anywhere, at any time. "Sleepers" are, by definition, people who have not undertaken any unlawful activity. Lacking any evidence linking the raids to the Bali atrocity, Federal Police commissioner Mick Keelty stated on Friday that the operation was not part of the Bali investigation.

In Indonesia, newspapers, television and radio coverage has featured accounts of Indonesian Muslims describing the invasion of their homes by heavily armed police and ASIO officers, provoking at least one street demonstration against Australian tourists.

Indonesia's Department of Foreign Affairs called Australia's charge d'affaires, David Ritchie, to protest the treatment of its citizens and the lack of advance warning from Australian authorities. "International conventions require notice prior to investigations, prior to taking any legal steps towards foreign nationals, and in this case we were never informed by the authorities concerned," a statement said.

Indonesian spokesman Marty Natalegawa said his government had "expressed our deepest concern about the reports we received concerning ill-treatment and treatment which in essence is unacceptable since it tends to ignore our nationals' basic rights".

The Howard government has proceeded with the total backing of the Labor Party. Labor leader Simon Crean has endorsed the raids, while New South Wales Labor Premier Bob Carr declared he found the ASIO operation "reassuring". Carr has announced the formation of a state police anti-terrorist unit to join in future operations, and, along with former Labor leader Kim Beazley, was a keynote speaker at a "Homeland Security" conference in Canberra on Thursday, where they reiterated Labor's election promise last November to create a US-style Ministry of Homeland Security, permitting military units to work closely with police and intelligence agencies.

In Perth, the West Australian capital, officers wearing balaclavas, flak jackets and night goggles raided several homes, including those of the Suparta and Herbert families in south-east suburban Thornlie, before dawn on Wednesday. Police smashed their way into some houses soon after 5am, breaking windows and splintering doors. Men, women and children were threatened by gun-wielding commandos and ordered to lie on the floor.

Helena was an eyewitness to the raid on her neighbours, the Suparta family. She told WSWS she was woken at 5.15 am by the sounds of loud bashing and crashing next door. "I was terrified, and I was only next door! There were four-wheel drive vehicles in the neighbours' front yard, all

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with their doors flung open, and guys in full battle gear around the house. They had flak jackets, helmets, and balaclavas. Others wore suits or casual clothes.

"I heard a 'whoop', 'whoop', 'whoop' sound, like a war cry. But I could not be sure. It might have been the officers yelling at the neighbours, telling them to lie down on the floor. There were six to eight men in uniform and another six to eight in civilian clothes, including some big burly guys and two women.

"They smashed the windows of the parents' bedroom, as well as the bedroom of their 17-year-old daughter, and some doors, including a playroom. They didn't even identify themselves.

"I woke my husband and he called out to the men, 'Is everything OK?' They refused to answer. There was no response at all. They obviously did not want to say a word. We were upset and nervous. We couldn't go back to sleep. We just stood by the kitchen window and watched.

"At one point, the police had the husband on the floor, on his stomach, handcuffed, and an officer put his boot on his ear. Guns were waved at the children. Later we saw the sub-machine guns. We didn't know who to call, because they seemed to be police but they weren't dressed like normal police. Finally, we called the media at about 7.30.

"When the media arrived, two men came out and tried to warn them off. They yelled out not to take photos of them, or show their faces. The cameramen were astounded and insisted that they would keep filming. On the news that night, the faces of the officers were blurred out.

"The whole operation lasted nearly seven hours. We went next door to comfort the family later in the afternoon, to give them moral support. They were a total mess. The wife, who does not speak good English, could not speak at all. I gave her a hug and all she could do was cry. One of the four children, a two-year-old, had a stomach virus and was vomiting.

"They were frightened by the police, who advised them not to speak to the media. The husband was very nervous, even though he has been in Australia for 14 years and can speak well. He is a registered gun owner, and he told us he thought it was a home invasion by a criminal gang. He ran through the house, saying 'where's my gun?' Luckily, he did not find it, or he could have been shot dead.

"The 17-year-old daughter said she couldn't come to terms with what had happened. She could not sleep and the children have not been back to school, because they are afraid of being called names or picked on.

"We have known the family since we moved here three years ago, and they are always friendly and nice. They are not at all strange—you can tell with people. They are not bigoted. In fact, the husband was originally a Christian and became a Muslim in order to marry his wife.

"I can understand how people who suffered in the Bali bombing might want to have those responsible caught, but we have to get the right people! ASIO must have every conceivable technological device on the planet for surveillance and phone tapping. They must know everything about this family. There is no excuse for going in boots and all like this. They have terrorised children and wives who cannot possibly have anything to do with terrorism.

"An intelligent person would obtain information differently. This was done without a whiff of suspicion. As the daughter said to me, 'all my father did was attend a lecture'.

"I would like to say that I am very disappointed in the Labor Party. They are supporting these raids. It is a bit like choosing between the Cybermen and the Daleks (characters from the BBC television series, Doctor Who)—both parties are ruthless, cold-blooded bastards. Labor is more right-wing than the right-wingers. That's why people are not voting for them. If anyone opposes the government, they will not vote Labor. Whoever gets in, we will have a right-wing government."

Stephen Hopper, the lawyer representing several families raided in Sydney, where the operation was first launched on Sunday night, said the ASIO and police officers had not been as violent as in Perth, but had drawn guns at the home of Jaya Basri and had physically detained and interrogated family members for hours on end at each house.

"There were up to 15 officers involved in each of the three raids on different members of the Basri family. Apart from the first raid, they had guns but did not draw them. They demanded immediate entry and then ran through the homes, securing the premises, and ordering the families not to move.

"During the second raid, I arrived while it was still proceeding. The ASIO officers packed up quickly, but they were probably finished anyway.

"It was like McCarthyism revisited. Then it was communism, now it is Islam. People were asked if they had ever been to a particular mosque, or if they belong to JI. No one in Indonesia knows what JI is. The name simply means 'Islamic community'. So, if you ask people, they are likely to say they are members.

"Jaya Basri was interrogated for about an hour. He was not told that he had the right to remain silent and he was given no warning that any comments could be used against him. Some of the questioning was recorded, yet there is nothing in the ASIO Act that permits forced detention and questioning. Indonesians do not understand the right to silence and, in any case, they are polite people, so they answer questions.

"The search warrants said nothing specific. They just rehashed the wording of the ASIO Act, referring to reasons to believe that information could be gathered relevant to intelligence. ASIO rifled through documents and took away all the usual things—birth and marriage certificates, diaries, computers, and even a copy of the *Daily Telegraph* —but no charges have been laid.

"The families are in trauma and stressed, but they are holding up well. They feel that if they stand up and go to the media, it shows that they have nothing to hide. It might also expose ASIO by putting a spotlight on its methods.

"I represent a number of families who were raided last year immediately following the September 11 attacks. No charges have been laid against them. In fact, the only illegalities uncovered by those raids were those committed by ASIO. My clients can't wait to see the outcome of the Bali investigations because there might be some interesting findings about who was actually responsible."

Less information is available on the operation in Melbourne, where the media and local Islamic leaders have reported "Rambo-style" raids on homes in numerous suburbs, including Preston, Brunswick, Bundoora, Noble Park, Burwood and Broadmeadows.

The Indonesian vice-consul to Melbourne, Kama Pradipta, has confirmed that ASIO officials executed search warrants on the homes of five Indonesians in the city—two female university students, who are Indonesian nationals, and three Indonesian men, who are permanent residents of Australia. "One man was held for five hours and has had his computer, laptop, books, records and holy Koran taken," he said.

The only victim who has spoken out publicly so far is Nismah Nukmal, an honours student at La Trobe University, who was two months away from finishing her thesis in the field of insect biology. Men identifying themselves as ASIO officers raided her home on Wednesday morning, taking all of her work. She has pleaded for the return of her computer, which holds her nearly completed thesis. "I need it, I need it, please help me—this is my thesis," she told ABC radio.

Lawyer Greg Connellan, a spokesman for Liberty Victoria, the state's civil liberties council, told WSWS that those raided may have felt too intimidated to seek media attention or legal advice. "The extent of the raids in Melbourne is just not known. If people were arrested, lawyers would only be able to find out through the media.

"If guns have been pointed at children, that's totally inexcusable. That can never be justified. There ought to be a parliamentary inquiry.

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Intelligence can be gathered without smashing down doors."

Connellan went on to point out that, in any event, the raids "would give a clear warning shot across the bows of any terrorists, allowing them to lie low. On the surface, the raids appear to be counter-productive, even totally pointless. If the authorities were seeking intelligence, they would do it differently."

It is becoming increasingly obvious that the raids have nothing to do with any genuine investigation of the Bali bombing or any other alleged terrorist activity. They are entirely political and directed consciously against some of the most vulnerable layers of society. Their purpose is to intimidate the general public and test out repressive measures for wider use against government opponents.

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