

# Bali victim's father indicts Australian government

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In an open letter to Prime Minister John Howard, a father whose son was killed in the October 12 Bali bombing has blamed the Australian government's belligerent policy of unconditional support for the Bush administration's global "war on terror" for the death of his son.

Brian Deegan's 22-year-old son Joshua was killed when a bomb exploded at Bali's Sari Club. He had been there with teammates and friends celebrating the end of the football season. His father's letter to the Prime Minister, published in the *Australian* on November 22, posed a series of questions about the government's conduct.

"Prime Minister, I ask you, not just as our nation's leader but as a father to answer some of my questions. Why did our children die and why have many others been sickeningly maimed? Was it because we, as a nation, have pursued a role in the US-led war on terror that we cannot possibly fulfil?"

Deegan, an Adelaide magistrate, pointed to the connection between the death of innocent civilians in Bali and the Howard government's support for American military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. "Since the tragedy of September 11, your words to the world have worried me. All too often, in the eyes of the world media, you have been our nation's unconditional supporter of President George W. Bush and US policy in the Middle East. Indeed, your Government's foreign policies indicate a preparedness for war. But are we and can we ever really be prepared?"

Deegan condemned the government's failure to pass on warnings of a terrorist attack on tourists in Bali. "To what extent," his letter asked, "was your Government aware of imminent danger to our citizens prior to October 12? After all, the US was reportedly well aware and it apparently alerted your Government. But

your Government did not make my son aware."

Deegan also criticised the violent raids conducted by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) against Indonesian Muslim families in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth following the Bali tragedy. "Why is your Government torturing certain citizens of our country by allowing armed invasions upon their private properties—all in the name of national security?"

His letter concluded by denouncing the government's policy of war. "As far as I'm aware, neither you nor I nor many people between our age groups have ever been remotely close to war. But it seems to me to be terribly unfair that it is men of our ages that pick the fights and then expect boys of my son's age to conduct the battle. Time and again countries send into battle children whose sense of adventure overshadows and totally clouds any sense of mortality."

In media interviews, Deegan further questioned the government's militarist response. "If somebody struck me in the street my first question to that person would be why? Why did you do it? Why hit me? I wouldn't just simply turn around and launch into a fight—I'd at least ask the question, why?"

Deegan's public stand evoked strong public support. "Great to see an article trying to address the causes of the threat to Australia and the 'why' of the Bali bombing," wrote an Australian living in Singapore to the *Australian's* web site. "These are not random acts by 'bad' people, they are responses to the posturing and actions of our government." The writer accused Howard of endangering the lives of ordinary people for his own political advantage. "While Howard plays Churchill, and eyes short-term political gain, all Australians are unnecessarily at risk across the region and even at home. A very high price to pay."

A Bali victim's cousin wrote to the *Australian*: "Most

families of victims have been poorly treated by inept politicians, especially John Howard and [Foreign Minister] Alexander Downer ... I am without doubt that if Howard's sons or daughter had planned to holiday in Bali, he'd have warned them not to go."

Another letter to the *Australian* stated: "Without the voice of people like Brian Deegan, Australia is surely heading down to war, crippling paranoia and worsening community relations." An *Adelaide Advertiser* reader wrote: "Mr Deegan is correct in saying John Howard's warmongering has turned us into a target, and our kids into cannon-fodder." A Darwin resident wrote simply: "Thank you Brian Deegan—you speak for so many of us."

Following the publication of his letter, Deegan called for a royal commission into what the government knew about terrorist risks in Bali. Howard immediately rejected the call. "I don't see the need for a royal commission," he told reporters. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer sought to dismiss Deegan as a distraught father, saying: "I don't really want to get into a debate with someone who is going through such an agonising experience as to lose a child in a terrorist attack."

Within several days, however, as it became obvious that Deegan's charges had won support from other Bali victims, as well as many others, the government was forced to change tack and attempt to answer him.

On November 26, the *Australian* published a reply to Deegan's letter by Howard. The Prime Minister expressed "deep sympathy" with Joshua Deegan's family but did not even refer to Brian Deegan's call for a public inquiry. "The US was not 'well aware' [of a terrorist threat]. Our Government was not 'alerted'," was his curt reply. He flatly rejected any suggestion that his government's foreign policy was responsible for the targeting of Australian civilians abroad and defended the ASIO raids.

Yet, Howard's letter contradicted a previous statement. On October 16, four days after the Bali blast, Howard was forced to admit in parliament that the CIA had given the Australian intelligence agencies prior information that terror attacks could take place in tourist locations throughout Indonesia, including Bali. While insisting that his government's travel advice had been "adequate," he felt obliged, given the anger developing among victims' relatives, to announce an

internal review into the matter, to be conducted by the Inspector-General of Intelligence Services, Bill Blick.

In the wake of Deegan's public statements, the government is clearly feeling under renewed pressure as more relatives came forward to ask why there was no warning of the Bali atrocity. On November 27, the *Adelaide Advertiser* published an article by Downer replying to questions raised by the families. While he maintained that the government had received no "specific" warning about Bali, he complained that media debate over what the government knew before October 12 had been "unhelpful".

Unconvinced, other correspondents are taking up Deegan's challenge to the government, and raising broader issues. A letter to the editor in the November 28 *Australian* commented: "On Melbourne Cup Day in 1968 I lost a brother, killed in Vietnam, in what most eventually recognised as a fruitless war. My father's thoughts were published the following day in an Adelaide newspaper. He said: 'At times like this we think of all those parents of young men on the other side who have lost a son.' Mr Deegan's comments reminded me of this brave position; one that is currently not very politically comfortable with many."

By calling into question the government's entire policy, Deegan is clearly giving voice to deep disquiet and misgivings among broad layers of the population with the consequences of the renewed drive to war against Iraq and the accompanying attacks on basic democratic rights.



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