Australian intelligence inquiry into Bali warnings "a whitewash"

Laura Tiernan
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The findings of an inquiry by Australia's Inspector General of Intelligence Services (IGIS) into the Bali bombing, which were released last month, have been condemned by relatives of the victims as a "whitewash".

In parliament on December 10, Prime Minister John Howard declared that the "the core conclusion" was that "there was no intelligence warning of the 12 October terrorist attacks in Bali". Yet the IGIS inquiry has provided no evidence to substantiate this conclusion.

Howard initiated the inquiry in October after revelations that intelligence warnings of a possible terror strike in Indonesia were not passed on to the public. He hoped it would quell public anger and suspicion and let his government off the hook.

His choice of an IGIS inquiry was no accident. IGIS is a small agency attached to the Prime Minister's own department. Unlike a Royal Commission or a Senate Inquiry, all its deliberations, including the taking of evidence and submissions, take place behind closed doors. Only a three-page "introduction and summary" of IGIS's findings is available to the public. The remainder of the report is classified information.

Even this general summary, however, points to the inquiry's perfunctory character. As the document explains, IGIS has powers equivalent to a Royal Commission. It can compel the presentation of documents as well as force intelligence personnel and government ministers to testify under oath. But none of these powers were exercised.

According to Inspector-General Bill Blick, the Australian security agencies "complied energetically and enthusiastically with all the inquiry's requests". This is not surprising as IGIS relied entirely on information that the agencies provided voluntarily. In other words, it assumed from the outset that the agencies had nothing to hide or cover up.

The investigation had "unfettered access to the premises, personnel and records of the intelligence and security agencies," but limited itself to keyword searches of electronic files as well as an examination of some paper files. Even these were carried out largely by teams within the agencies rather than the inquiry staff.

The inquiry's threadbare investigative methods included a circular to intelligence staff asking "anyone who had seen or heard of, or who believed they may have seen or heard of" any relevant intelligence to "bring it to the notice of the agency or this inquiry". In other words, staff were asked to volunteer information that had the potential to embarrass the agency concerned. Only one person stepped forward, not with specific information, but to "offer views on intelligence collection and analysis".

Howard ensured that the inquiry's terms of reference were narrowly defined—to examine whether the bombing at the Sari Club in Bali on October 10 could have been predicted or not. As a result, the outcome was largely predetermined, with all evidence not pointing to a specific time and location effectively ignored.

Blick found that "in the months before the attack, there were numerous intelligence indications of possible terrorist activity, including activity in Indonesia, with foreign interests or foreigners as likely targets". He even found, but dismissed, a foreign report that included Bali as a possible target. Yet he nevertheless concluded that "there was no intelligence warning of the attack" and that the risk assessments to travellers at the time were "appropriate" and "realistic".

While Australia's intelligence services were spared serious scrutiny, the Howard government's role was not even a subject of investigation. Blick had nothing to say about the performance of the Department of Foreign Affairs because the Prime Minister did not direct him to do so as part of the terms of reference.

Opposite conclusions was reached by a similar inquiry conducted in the British parliament by the Commons

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Intelligence and Security Committee. Its findings, released on December 11, were that "a threat existed to western tourists in Indonesia; the largest concentration of western tourists there is on Bali; and they gather there in large numbers in a limited number of nightclubs. These facts should have been recognised by the Security Service (MI5) as pointing to a potential target. This was a serious misjudgment and meant that the Security Service did not assess the threat correctly and, therefore, raise the level of threat to high."

The British inquiry concluded that while there was no specific warning of an attack in Bali, there was "generic threat information" about Indonesia and the security services should have upgraded the country's threat assessment from "significant" to high". British diplomatic staff in Indonesia were warned as early as February of a heightened security risk.

The British committee found that in the lead-up to October 12, subscribers to a Foreign Office web service were emailed twice with safety warnings about Indonesia. The second of these, on October 3, warned recipients they should stay away from bars and nightclubs. Yet none of this advice was passed on to the British public via the Foreign Office website or travel agencies.

In Australia, the public was also kept in the dark, despite evidence showing intelligence officers were aware of dangers. Melbourne's *Herald Sun* revealed that senior military personnel en route to Indonesia were warned to avoid bars and clubs frequented by tourists. The advice to the public was that tourist services in Bali were "operating normally".

The US government, based on CIA intelligence, had twice warned its citizens in Indonesia prior to the Bali bombing to "avoid large gatherings known to cater primarily to Western clientele including certain bars, restaurants and tourist areas". Howard first denied, then was forced to admit that Australian intelligence agencies had received the CIA information.

The IGIS inquiry simply dismissed "public allegations that warnings had been issued before the attack," declaring that "none of these proved to have any substance." But Blick provided no evidence to disprove any of them.

The IGIS findings provoked angry reactions from relatives of the victims. More than 190 people were killed in the terrorist attack, including 88 Australians. Brian Deegan, whose 22-year-old son Joshua was killed in Bali, condemned the report. "The spooks are investigating the spooks" he told the *Adelaide Advertiser*. "Why should we believe anything in this because it's an inside job."

Joe Golotta, the uncle of Bali victim Angela Golotta, 19, told the *World Socialist Web Site* the report was a "whitewash". He explained that the findings contradicted earlier admissions by the Howard government.

"Alexander Downer [Foreign Minister] has written there were threats and he passed on the information to the embassy staff in Indonesia. He also said he'd passed it on to people in the tourism industry and basically left it at that. I thought that was pretty weak. It should have been in the media itself and let the people themselves decide whether it's a big enough threat or not—let them make that decision.

"I find it just totally ridiculous that the government didn't warn the people. They should have warned the people of a possible threat. It's totally inept of them as far as I'm concerned."

Golotta travelled to Bali in the immediate aftermath of the bombing to give assistance to his brother and sister-in-law. He spoke of the disorganisation and chaos surrounding the treatment of the injured and the identification of bodies. His comments underscore the fact that the Howard government's "war on terror" has nothing to do with protecting the lives and well-being of ordinary people.

"After September 11, I would have thought that they'd have some sort of contingency plan for such a major event. It took forever. It took from Saturday night when the bombing happened, about four or five days before they got things in order. Sure, they got the Hercules [transport aircraft] up there and got the injured people out. But the remaining people that were there, all the dead people, there was just no order.

"No-one had flown up there at all. It was ridiculous. They didn't have a contingency plan for a major event. They hide behind the politics of it saying 'it was in Indonesia, we can't step on their toes'. As far as I'm concerned that's a lot of crap, because if they'd flown over there with a Hercules full of doctors and equipment they'd have been welcomed with open arms because [the Indonesians] were in desperate need of help."

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