

# Australia: Families of Bali victims denounce Howard and the Iraq war

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A significant but little publicised component of the opposition in Australia to the war on Iraq has been statements from the relatives of those killed in last year's terrorist bombing in Bali. They have been highly critical of Prime Minister John Howard, in particular, for attempting to exploit the tragedy, in which more than 180 people died, as a reason for Australia's participation in the war.

On March 10, during an official visit to New Zealand, Howard was asked on how he would justify the inevitable fatalities in any war. He replied: "I think the Australian people will understand that if we are engaged in military conflict that casualties could occur, but casualties can occur in the most benign of circumstances. We lost 88 Australians [sic—there were 89] in Bali because of the wilful act of international terrorism, and we all had to grapple with that. I will, among other things, be asking the Australian people to bear those circumstances in mind if we become involved in military conflict in Iraq".

Families of the Bali victims immediately condemned the self-serving statement. They noted the lack of any evidence connecting the bombing in Bali to the Baghdad regime and warning that a war on Iraq would only heighten the danger of future terrorist attacks.

Brian Deegan, an Adelaide magistrate, who lost his son Josh in the tragedy, has previously opposed Howard's support for the so-called war on terrorism and demanded to know what intelligence warnings the government received prior to the bombing. He denounced Howard's comments in New Zealand and said no connection could be drawn between Bali and war on Iraq. "How dare he suddenly use my son as a means for going into an illegal activity. He's a nasty little man who's going to get my kids killed," he said.

Speaking later on ABC Radio, Deegan said: "What I'm concerned about is the prime minister is seemingly using this tragedy to justify the possibility of further tragedy,

that other tragedy having no connection whatsoever with my son's death. The Australian government has absolutely no business legally, morally, or any other reason to be entering Iraq. To use the death of civilians in Bali to justify what, in my opinion, is an exercise in cynicism."

Gold Coast doctor Bruce Whelan, whose 32-year-old son-in-law Shane Walsh-Till died in Bali, told the media that Howard's comments were an attempt to gain "political leverage" from the tragedy. He rejected Australian involvement in the war against Iraq.

Some of the strongest comments came from Hannabeth Luke, a 22-year-old Australian student who survived the Bali attack. She publicly confronted British Prime Minister Blair over his commitment to war against Iraq on Britain's *Tonight* television program. "If you had experienced the horrors I have seen, known the grief I have known, you would be doing everything in your power to ensure that no other individual would ever have to go through this terrible experience," she said.

She later explained to reporters: "I tried to say [to Blair]: will your conscience allow you to bring death to thousands of innocent Iraqis? Will your conscience allow you to bring more death and destruction on innocent people?" Condemning Howard's comments, she said: "There is no link [between Bali and Iraq]. The government is not realising that as long as they treat the symptoms and not the causes, terrorism will increase".

Luke also challenged Howard in a full-page comment entitled "Please Mr. Howard Stop the Bloodshed", in Sydney's *Herald Sun*. "I have seen the horrific results of hatred and aggression and I have felt its lasting consequences in my heart," it read.

"I witnessed at first-hand scenes of such unimaginable horror, things I never thought I would see in my life. Yet, here we are on the brink of a war that is certain to cause more bloodshed, more pain and more horror for the

people of Iraq, while inevitably increasing the risk of further terrorist attacks against the West.”

Luke referred to her boyfriend, Marc Gojard, who was killed in the Bali blast. “If he were alive today to see what our world leaders are doing I’m sure he would have been completely baffled. He would not see any sense in an aggressive act of war that is bound to isolate us further from Islamic countries and push more ordinary Muslims towards the fanaticism of Al Qaeda.”

She flatly rejected Howard government claims that invading Iraq would “make the world safer” by removing alleged weapons of mass destruction.

“All we hear is talk of weapons of mass destruction and I, for one, am sick of it. Whatever weapons Saddam Hussein may, or may not, possess is not the issue. The threat to the west is terrorism and war will do nothing to stop it. ... What sort of a twisted logic is it that says we are going to create peace and security for ourselves by waging war on Iraq?

“What happened in Bali devastated me and changed my life forever in so many different ways. But the fundamental way that I look at the world has not altered... I am saying that war will not solve anything. It will not make countries like Australia any more safe. It will not make terrorism go away. I am saying that the war will only make things worse. It will cause violence and hatred in the world to escalate... If there is a chance to stop even one death we should seize it. It’s what [Gojard] would have wanted.”

The reaction of the families of the Bali victims highlights the depth of antiwar sentiment. While there was a widespread anger and distress in the aftermath of the Bali tragedy, the government has been unable to channel this deeply-felt concern into support for the US-led attack on Iraq. In fact, Howard’s attempt to justify participation in the invasion by reference to the Bali bombing is a measure of the government’s isolation and weakness.



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