

Australian government announces new military force for domestic use

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The Australian Federal government has used the threat of increased terrorism following the US-led war on Iraq to further bolster repressive state powers. On May 18, Defence Minister Robert Hill confirmed the government would draw 1,000 personnel from Australia's 25,000-strong Army Reserve to create a special body trained in "counter terrorism" duties. The move constitutes another assault on fundamental civil rights. It is a further step towards the removal of any restrictions on the use of the armed forces in civil affairs and is designed to accustom the public to an increasing military presence.

Hill made the announcement in the midst of a global terrorism alert following terror attacks in Saudi Arabia and Morocco last week and on the eve of the trial in Indonesia of two suspects in last October's Bali terrorist bombing. The decision also comes in the wake of last week's federal budget, which allocated \$411 million to new "homeland security" measures.

Australian Defence Force (ADF) chief General Peter Cosgrove has instructed the Reserve to select personnel to undergo training for the new force between June and September this year. Known as the Reserve Response Force (RRF), it will become fully operational by October, although some units could be ready by as early as July. The RRF will be comprised of six units of 150 people, to be stationed in every state capital on the mainland, with two units in Sydney. Significantly, RRF personnel will have the authority to carry firearms when deployed in public places. Provisions have also been made to transfer some of the more highly skilled graduates of the RRF course to an elite, specialist squad—the High Readiness Reserve—whose role has yet to be defined.

While much is being made by the government and the media about the role of the new force in providing security for so-called Australian icons, such as the Sydney Harbor Bridge and the Opera House, as well as other strategic sites "in the case of a terror alert", it will, in reality, have a far wider role. Hill admitted the RRF would be used to provide assistance at short notice to civil authorities not only in the

"event of terrorism" but also during "other civil emergencies".

In a Defence Department briefing, Hill confirmed the RRF will complement the Australian Defence Force's full-time counter-terrorism capabilities. These include the Tactical Assault Groups, stationed on the east and west coasts, and the Incident Response Regiment, both of which fall under the recently formed Special Operations Command (SOCOMD). The RRF will receive training in crowd and traffic control and will be "employed primarily as formed units to cordon off an area, provide static protection of a site or to assist other ADF elements". It may also provide "limited on-site medical and transport support".

The government is determined to exploit the Bush administration's "war on terror" and its own participation in the war against Iraq to bring forward plans that have been under consideration for some time.

The proposal for the new force was originally foreshadowed by Prime Minister John Howard in December last year when he asked ADF heads to investigate the feasibility of reservists being used in counter-terrorism activities. Aware of the long-standing public opposition to the use of the military in domestic affairs, the government has seized every opportunity to advance its agenda.

In September 2000, Howard used the pretext of the threat of supposed terrorist attacks at the Sydney Olympic Games to push through military call-out legislation allowing the armed forces to be mobilised against political protests and social unrest without the agreement of state governments—something that had previously been required. The legislation was passed with the support of the federal Labor Party Opposition.

The legislation's wide ranging and permanent measures permit the military to fire on civilians, providing three government ministers deem the action necessary to prevent injury or damage to property. They also provide the military with immunity from criminal or civil liability for actions committed during a call out.

While army reservists were used at the 2000 Olympics, the

significance of the RRF is that it will be a dedicated force, specifically trained to deal with “civil emergencies.” It will be on permanent standby for rapid deployment against social disturbances such as protests and demonstrations. If it acts under the terms of the 2000 call-out legislation, the RRF will have greater powers than the police—including the right to shoot to kill, search premises without warrants, detain people, seal off areas and issue orders to civilians.

Once again demonstrating Labor’s unanimity with the government on every major issue, federal Opposition leader Simon Crean extended his full support, declaring the formation of the RRF to be “welcome.” Crean made no mention of the unprecedented character of the new policy and the fact that it will institutionalise the military’s capacity to intervene in the domestic arena.

Crean was joined by New South Wales (NSW) Labor Premier Bob Carr who has been in the forefront of “law and order” campaigning to introduce greater police powers and harsher sentencing in Australia. Carr declared: “It’s a good principle, it’s one I’ve been calling for, and the Federal government will find we’ll be totally cooperative.” South Australia’s Labor Premier Mike Rann enthused that he was “delighted that the Federal government is giving us [state governments] backup”. Like his counterpart in NSW, Rann has strengthened police powers by establishing a special anti-terrorist unit within the state police force.

Not surprisingly, the proposal also won the immediate backing of Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian*. *The Australian* has been one of the most ardent supporters of the government’s participation in the US-led war on Iraq and Washington’s “war on terror”, as well as a champion of proposed government legislation to bolster the power of Australia’s intelligence and security agencies.

The paper’s May 19 editorial declared that Australia’s security strategy “must be versatile, multifaceted and properly resourced” and “if the Army Reserve can play a significant role in that effort, then excellent...” It went on to criticise the recent Federal budget allocation of \$95 million for the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and \$79 million for the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) as “pretty paltry”, and condemned what it termed “the politicisation of homeland security” as “lamentable”. It demanded Labor and the minor parties pass government legislation due to go before the Senate later this year to further strengthen ASIO’s powers.

The National Servicemen’s Association of Australia used the occasion to call for a bolstering of the country’s armed forces, with its spokesman Allen Callaghan claiming that conscription would be needed to provide enough reservists to maintain the new force. Australian Defence Association executive director Neil James said he welcomed the plan “as

long as the new units had an incident response capability and were not used merely as guards at strategic sites”. In other words, the Association supports the formation of the RRF so long as it has the power to use armed force.

The government ruled out the need for the reintroduction of national service, saying it had advice from Defence Force chiefs that the RRF could be managed “within existing resources”. The denial, however, could prove to be short-lived.

Since coming to power in 1996, the Howard government has implemented a series of measures to increase reservist numbers, including incentives to business to release recruits for training purposes. Despite this, it has failed to meet its recruitment targets for the last four years. In 2000-01 recruitment was down 50 percent on the target of 5,232.

Over recent years, reservists have been called on to play an increasingly active role as the Howard government has turned to military interventions to pursue the financial and strategic interests of Australia’s ruling elite in the Asia-Pacific region. In both East Timor and Bougainville, reservists have been used to support regular forces in so-called peacekeeping operations.

With Australia providing troops for the ongoing neo-colonial occupation of Iraq and preparing for further military adventures within the region, the country’s relatively small military forces could rapidly become overextended.

The creation of the RRF serves two interrelated purposes: to provide a force with far-reaching powers for the suppression of social unrest at home and to free up the regular armed forces for further military incursions abroad.



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