One year after the Bali bombing

The Australian government and the “war on terrorism”

The Editorial Board
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This weekend marks the first anniversary of the bomb blasts that tore apart two popular nightclubs on the Indonesian island of Bali, indiscriminately killing 200 innocent people. Most of the victims were young tourists from around the world, including 88 Australians. Another 40 were Indonesians, mostly workers at the Sari nightclub or taxi drivers waiting outside. Many more people were maimed and disfigured for life. In Australia, at least a third of the 66 serious burns patients are still being treated for their injuries.

Detonated in the late evening of Saturday October 12, the terrorist atrocity was timed to cause the maximum carnage. A minor bomb exploded outside the US consulate, followed by an explosion outside Paddy’s Bar and then a large van bomb outside the Sari Club. The nightspots are in the centre of Kuta Beach—a particular favourite for young holidaymakers, newlyweds and sporting clubs. At that time of day, the bars were packed and the streets outside crowded.

While the attack was clearly targetted at foreign tourists, the bombers displayed equal contempt for local working people. Apart from leaving scores of families without breadwinners, the bombings devastated the Balinese and Indonesian economies, destroying the livelihoods of thousands more. Bali was one of the most popular tourist destinations in South East Asia, hosting 30,000 to 50,000 visitors from Australia alone at any one time.

The anniversary raises crucial political issues. Like the Bali tragedy itself, it is being exploited by the Australian government, to advance an agenda of aggressive military intervention abroad and the trampling on basic democratic rights at home, all in the name of the “war on terrorism”.

Speaking in parliament this week, Prime Minister John Howard invoked the memory of the Bali victims to declare that Australia would fight the war on terrorism to the end. “At the very least we owe it to those who died in Bali to never desist in our attempts—along with our allies—to destroy terrorism around the world. If we do not do that we will have failed one of our most basic duties to those people.”

Howard’s support for the “war on terrorism” has never had anything to do with protecting ordinary Australians. His government’s policies contributed to making Bali a target for Islamic extremists and ensured a large number of Australians were killed. One year on, he is cynically trying to exploit the grief and emotions produced by the tragedy to justify a course of action that can only further heighten the danger of terrorist attacks in the Asia-Pacific region and internationally.

The Howard government bears significant responsibility for inflaming anti-Western sentiment in Indonesia and throughout South East Asia. In 1999, Canberra manipulated events in East Timor to facilitate an Australian-led intervention as a means of pursuing its long-held aim of controlling the rich Timor Gap oil and gas reserves. Howard himself became notorious throughout the region for his aspiration to become Washington’s “deputy sheriff” in South East Asia.

Following the September 11 attacks on the US, Howard became one of the most vocal supporters of the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism”. He fully endorsed Washington’s aggressive militarist stance and the doctrine of “preemptive strike,” calculating that it would enable Australia to carry out its own neo-colonial adventures closer to home. Australia was one of the few countries to commit combat troops to the US-led attack on Afghanistan.

But having raised the danger of terrorist attack, the Howard government failed to caution ordinary Australians who continued to flock to tourist resorts in South East Asia—Bali in particular. While he claims to speak in the name of the Bali victims, Howard has treated the survivors and the victims’ families with contempt. First and foremost he has refused to explain why they and their loved ones were not warned about the likelihood of a terrorist attack at Kuta Beach.

Right up to 12 October 2002, the Howard government assured ordinary Australians it was safe to visit Bali, despite receiving several specific warnings from US intelligence agencies, as well as its own Office of National Assessments (ONA), about likely attacks on the island in response to the US-led assault on Afghanistan.

On the day of the bombing, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) travel advice merely cautioned Australians in Indonesia to “maintain a high level of personal security awareness,” while emphasising that tourist services were functioning normally across Indonesia, “including Bali”. An Australian Embassy bulletin stated: “Bali is calm and tourist services are operating normally.”

While tourists were kept in the dark, intelligence agencies gave the opposite advice to military personnel, diplomats and the management of Qantas, the main airline profiting from travel to Bali. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) advised Qantas on 3 July 2002 that: “Given the JI [Jemaah Islamiyah] presence in Indonesia, neither Jakarta nor Bali could be considered exempt from attack.”

On the basis of reports by ASIO and the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO), the Defence Security Agency promulgated a warning on 12 August 2002, upgrading its threat assessment to “high” and insisting that: “All defence members travelling to Indonesia and South East Asia be briefed on the threat.” According to media reports, Australian diplomats visiting Indonesia were also instructed to avoid bars and clubs frequented by tourists.

Speaking in parliament four days after the Bali bombing, Howard admitted for the first time that the country’s intelligence agencies had indeed received prior information that terrorist attacks could occur throughout Indonesia, including Bali. His admission followed a *Washington Post* report the previous day that the CIA had identified threats to attack a tourist site in Indonesia, mentioning Bali and other

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locations.

Facing mounting public anger, including among Bali victims' families, Howard initially established an inquiry by William Blick, the Inspector General of Intelligence and Security. In his report, selected extracts of which were released last December, Blick acknowledged that a "foreign report" had specified Bali as a possible terrorist target. Nevertheless, he concluded that "there was no intelligence warning of the attack" and the travel advisories issued to tourists were "appropriate".

Blick's report was such a transparent sham that a further inquiry was cobbled together in the Senate on March 24, with the support of Labor, the Australian Democrats and the Greens. Once the Senate's foreign affairs committee called for submissions from the security agencies, it soon emerged that Howard and Blick had covered-up two Bali-specific warnings issued by ONA, which reports directly to the prime minister's office.

The first, handed to the government on 27 September 2001, assessed the heightened risks of terrorist retaliation following the invasion of Afghanistan. According to the ONA's submission to the Senate inquiry, the report said there were no signs of planned attacks on tourist hotels in Bali or Lombok, but "extremists see them as havens of Western decadence". Further, "a tourist hotel in Bali would be an important symbolic target, damaging Indonesia's standing and its debilitated economy".

ONA's second warning came in a personal briefing given to Foreign Minister Alexander Downer on June 18 and 19, 2002. In the ONA's words: "Toward the end of the briefing session, in response to a question from Mr Downer about possible targets, Bali, Riau and Singapore were assessed to be attractive targets for Jemaah Islamiyah ... International hotels, nightclubs and airlines/airports were assessed as being high on terrorists' target lists."

Former senior ONA analyst Andrew Wilkie, who resigned from the agency in March to expose the lies being told by the government to justify joining the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq, also revealed that while he was still working for ONA, one of his colleagues had shown him a document warning that Bali was a potential terrorist target.

Nevertheless, Howard and his ministers have persisted in claiming that they had no intelligence warning of a possible Bali attack. No minister has been called to appear before the Senate committee, giving the clearest indication that its findings will in no way challenge the government's conduct.

Survivors who testified before the Senate inquiry in Adelaide last month expressed shock when shown copies of an Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) assessment, active since 28 September 2001, classifying Indonesia as a high-level threat to Australians. One after another, they declared they would not have taken their holidays if they had been made aware of ASIO's warnings.

Sturt footballers Julian Burton and Andrew Whiteman said players saw Bali as a safe place to celebrate their grand final victory. "Bali has always been the place where Australians go," he said. "To me the Australian government . . . did not do the right thing."

David Marshall, whose father, Sturt official Bob Marshall, 68, died, said his father had not been warned and believed Bali was a haven. "He would not have gone had there been any warnings (and) he would not have let the Sturt boys go," Marshall said. "The Marshall family firmly believes the Australian government has failed in its duty-of-care to Australians intending to travel to Bali."

Whether its failure to warn of the dangers of a terrorist attack was the product of gross negligence and contempt for the interests of ordinary citizens or something more sinister, Canberra has certainly profitted politically from the Bali bombings. Howard and his ministers immediately seized on the tragedy, declaring that Bali was Australia's own "September 11," to carry through far-reaching shifts in both domestic and foreign policy.

The Bali blasts were presented as new proof of an "arc of instability" from South East Asia to Fiji, requiring Australian military and political intervention throughout the region. Australian police and intelligence officers were dispatched in force to Indonesia for the first time, boosting their ties with the Indonesian security forces and setting a precedent for use in other countries.

In the past 12 months Australia has signed counter-terrorism pacts with eight regional countries—Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, India, East Timor, Cambodia, Fiji and the Philippines. In the name of fighting terrorism, close ties have been resumed with Indonesia's notorious Kopassus special forces, an organisation with a record of terror—from the torture and murder of political opponents to systematic violence against entire populations in East Timor, West Papua and Aceh.

Most significantly, Howard invoked the Bali bombing to justify the dispatch of Australian troops to join the Bush administration's criminal and illegal invasion of Iraq. In the face of the largest anti-war protests in Australian history, he cynically exploited the tragedy to bolster Washington's case for what was a naked US grab for oil and power in the Middle East.

Within months, the Howard government's own motives for supporting the invasion and occupation of Iraq became evident. Australian soldiers and police were dispatched to the Solomon Islands, also in the name of combatting the threat of terrorism, to establish colonial-style control over the impoverished country and assert Australian hegemony over the South West Pacific.

At home, the government wasted no time in creating a climate of anti-Muslim prejudice, launching sweeping attacks on democratic rights under the banner of fighting terrorism. Within two weeks of the Bali bombing, heavily-armed ASIO officers and the Australian Federal Police carried out violent dawn raids on the homes of Islamic working class families.

At the same time, government ministers stepped up their agitation for the passage of new laws giving ASIO the unprecedented power to detain and interrogate people without trial, simply on the suspicion that they may have information about terrorism. Ultimately, the anti-democratic legislation was passed, with the support of the Labor opposition, eight months later.

Howard has even used the trials of the men charged with carrying out the Bali bombing to try to place the reintroduction of the death penalty back on the agenda. The four main hearings were rushed through the Indonesian courts under draconian anti-terrorism laws, insisted upon by Canberra and Washington, that were then applied retrospectively to the Bali bombing suspects in breach of the constitution. As soon as the first death sentence was announced, Howard, joined by Labor leader Simon Crean, hailed the outcome and deliberately encouraged a public debate over the death penalty in Australia.

Over the last 12 months, the Howard government's cynical use of the Bali bombing has provoked growing opposition from the survivors and the families of the victims. Many have expressed deep anger at the way they have been treated. For all its claims of sympathy and compassion, the government's assistance package covers only "out-of-pocket" medical, rehabilitation, transport and counselling costs, plus short-term emergency financial aid.

Adelaide magistrate Brian Deegan, whose son Josh, 22, died in Bali said Australia had signed a UN resolution on compensation to victims of terrorism in 1985, but the Howard government's offer to the Bali victims amounted to "nothing more than Medicare (limited medical costs) plus taxi rides".

A courageous few have been outspoken in their opposition to the Howard government, making clear that they want no part of the rightwing political agenda that is being carried out in their name. Deegan said his son was part of the "collateral damage" of the government's military

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campaigns in East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq. The government had been “reckless with young Australians’ lives” and the “loop of negligence” included the government, airlines and travel agents.

In July, Deegan wrote a powerful statement, condemning the death sentence handed down to Amrozi—the first to be convicted over the bombings and pointing to the broader issues raised by the Bali tragedy.

“The suggestion that Amrozi and his fellow evildoers should face in Indonesian firing squad is unconscionable because that would make the punishment as barbaric as the crime,” he wrote.

“Politically, I am confused. It could be argued that these men who proclaim Allah has guided them did not single out my son. Rather, they viewed the group of tourists at the Sari Club on that October night as representative of a Western collective of terror whose leaders had bombed Muslim states such as Afghanistan and Iraq, so killing, albeit inadvertently, equally innocent children. Surely, I’m not the only person to view this as an inevitable link in an unbroken chain in Australia’s foreign affairs.”

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