

Netherlands: Arming the state in response to growing poverty and unemployment

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The Dutch coalition government consisting of the CDA (Christian-Democratic-Appeal), VVD (the liberal Peoples Party for Freedom and Democracy) and D66 (Democrats '66) is reacting to the country's economic crisis and growing poverty by limiting civil rights and strengthening the state apparatus. In particular, surveillance and spying on the population are to be expanded.

For the first time since the Nazi occupation, Dutch citizens are obliged to carry an identity card. The police and secret service (AVID) are already permitted to conduct arbitrary body searches in districts declared to be so-called "security zones," as well as surveil whole streets using video cameras. Foreigners and people suspected to be of foreign origin are those most affected by the growing number of police checks. A newly established police unit is conducting a systematic hunt of suspected "illegal" aliens.

These measures go hand in hand with an aggressive campaign by the media depicting allegedly illegal refugees living in the Netherlands and Islamic fundamentalists as ready to use violence. These kinds of reports are utilised by Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende (CDA) and his government to justify expanded powers for the police force and secret service. While the government does not attempt to conceal its aggressive xenophobic policies, its attacks on democratic rights and the arming of the state apparatus are directed against the entire population.

In their coalition agreement drawn up upon taking power, the ruling parties had already agreed to make more funds available for the police and invest more in "public security." Now the real meaning of these measures is becoming clear.

The minister of the interior, Johan Remkes (VVD), is planning a centralisation of the police force under his control. Until now, the Dutch police force consisted of 26 regional police corps headed by the offices of the various town mayors. Remkes plans to place the regional police offices under his authority by 2005 and establish a uniform structure throughout the Netherlands. This new police force is to be supplied with an extensive data processing system to improve the exchange of information.

The minister of justice, Piet Hein Donner (CDA), is planning two measures aimed at severe limitations of civil rights. One planned change is that testimonies made to the secret service are to be made available for use in trials—as it is already the case in Germany—even if the witness does not appear in court and remains anonymous. This would open the way for arbitrary manipulation of testimony by the secret service.

The other change planned by Donner is a law that will oblige organisations and institutions to pass on private data to an authority conducting an inquiry. Recently, the secret service has continuously increased the number of tapped telephone calls. But the newest legislative initiative, which recalls the Patriot Act passed in the US, goes far beyond the existing legislative powers of the police: in addition to customer, insurance, and account numbers, travel habits and religious, political, and sexual preferences are also to be registered.

With the help of data acquired from banks, insurance companies, libraries, video libraries, travel companies, car rentals, etc., the government is planning to obtain a profile of everyone living in Holland. A new law is already before parliament that would give authorities access to the data of telecommunications companies. This will make all Internet users identifiable to the police.

The comment that such extensive spying is only to be permitted in order to solve a crime punishable with at least four years imprisonment, and will require the consent of a judge, is not very reassuring when one takes into account experiences in other countries.

Apparently the government is aware of this. To implement new possibilities of surveillance, it is stirring up the fear of terrorist attacks in a manner similar to that of the US. The Dutch secret service has been claiming that the threat of attacks has been mounting for some time now. An audiotape made public in October, allegedly from Osama bin Laden, mentions the Netherlands as a prime target. The British as well as the Dutch secret services are warning of possible terrorist attacks in the Netherlands.

It cannot be ruled out that the Netherlands, which has forces involved in the occupation of Iraq, could become the target of a terrorist attack. At any rate, 1,200 Dutch soldiers, including special forces and helicopter gunships, are stationed in southern Iraq, where they are cooperating with the British occupation troops. In addition to this, the Dutch-British oil company Royal Dutch Shell has a definite interest in the Iraqi oilfields.

Nevertheless, the declaration by the government of a very high danger of terrorist attack is clearly aimed at dismantling civil rights and strengthening the state apparatus. From time to time this development takes grotesque forms. To stress the danger of an attack, the population has recently been terrorised by the howling of emergency alert sirens. Though these sirens were scarcely used by the government in the past, they are now being tested every month. The inhabitants of the town Wilnis had to be informed via radio that the alert was only a test in order to prevent a panic. Shortly before, however, an entire town had to be evacuated because of a breach in a dike and the danger of flooding. In this case, where the public faced real danger, the sirens had not been used.

The hunt for alleged “Islamic extremists” is also supposed to create fear, first of all amongst foreigners. People are being arrested regularly based on information coming from the secret service, only to be released after some time in detention. In one example, four “terrorist suspects” were arrested after the secret service had tapped their telephones and allegedly recognised code words indicating an attack. All of the suspects’ houses were searched, but no evidence for the claims made by the secret service could be produced.

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Increased surveillance and spying on the population are taking place during the most severe economic recession of the last 20 years. While the funds of the state apparatus are constantly being raised, the government is axing all other state expenditures, especially in the social sector. As a result, the most vulnerable layers of society are those hit hardest: the unemployed, the sick and immigrants. Prime Minister Balkenende’s government is planning to cut 5.7 billion euros from social services this year alone.

This policy will inevitably lead to rising poverty. According to a report issued by the planning office for social and cultural affairs last December, the number of households affected by poverty will rise to 11 percent, or 650,000 households. The planning office defines poverty to begin at a yearly income of 8,000 euros for single persons and 14,400 euros for families with two children. At the same time, the report makes the point that poorer households are confronted with rising indebtedness. At least half of such households

are no longer capable of paying off their debts.

This development has been accelerated by rising unemployment and recently implemented increases of contributions to pension funds as well as to health and accident insurance funds. Officially, unemployment is rising continuously every month and at the beginning of this year exceeded 7 percent. In this context, it is remarkable that the number of people dependent on national insurance is increasing more rapidly than those registered as officially unemployed.

This can be explained by the fact that in the Netherlands unemployment statistics do not include single parents, unemployed people older than 57 years, people receiving income support, people receiving a pension because they are unable to work for health reasons, and unemployed people whose last job was part-time amounting to 12 hours a week or less. Other calculations made by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) concluded that the real unemployment figure lies at 27 percent. If one takes into account that nearly every third job is part-time, the true extent of the social crisis becomes clearer.

At the same time, a wave of mass redundancies is continuing. The Dutch railway company, for example, announced that contrary to obligations laid down in contracts and agreements, it is planning to slash 1,500 jobs in the coming years.

Despite this catastrophic situation, the government is planning to intensify cuts in social services. The cuts so far amounting to 5.7 billion euros are only a third of those planned, which are set to total 17 billion euros by 2007. According to recent calculations, the Netherlands belongs to those countries exceeding the limits set by the European Union for economic stability regarding new debts. As a consequence, debates have begun about extending the cuts in social services to give big business more financial support. These considerations will become a harsh reality by next spring at the latest, when the office for statistics confirms that the Netherlands has exceeded limits regarding indebtedness.



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