

# More evidence of Australian government's failure to warn of Bali bombings

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A series of recent revelations—involving Qantas, the Australian airline, and the country's intelligence agencies—has raised new questions about why the government failed to warn ordinary Australians that the Indonesian resort island of Bali had become a terrorist bombing target.

On the night of October 12, 2002, thousands of holiday makers from Australia were in Bali's Kuta nightclub district when bomb blasts went off, indiscriminately killing 200 innocent people. Among the dead were young tourists from several countries, including 88 Australians. Forty Indonesians were also killed—mostly workers at the Sari nightclub, where the main blast occurred, or taxi drivers waiting outside.

The latest disclosures further expose the government's repeated claims that it had no "specific" intelligence warnings of a likely atrocity in Bali. Right up until the bombing, the government insisted it was safe to visit Bali, despite receiving several explicit warnings from US intelligence agencies, as well as its own Office of National Assessments (ONA), about likely attacks on the island in response to Australia's participation in 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 the country, "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 were giving the opposite advice to military personnel, diplomats and the management of Qantas, the main airline servicing travel from Australia to Bali. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) advised Qantas on July 3, 2002 that: "Given the JI [Jemaah Islamiyah] presence in Indonesia, neither Jakarta nor Bali could be considered exempt from attack." Some weeks later, according to Qantas pilots and cabin crew, the company warned them not to use well-known hotels and nightclubs on the island.

Similarly, on the basis of reports by ASIO and the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO), the Defence Security Agency promulgated a warning on August 12, 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 instructed to avoid bars and clubs frequented by tourists.

The latest cracks in the Howard government's claims began to emerge on May 5 when the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported that Qantas had been summoned to appear before an ongoing Senate committee inquiry into the government's decision not

to issue a Bali travel advisory.

Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee members were reportedly concerned that the airline may have pressured the government not to issue a travel warning, following confirmation that Qantas held further discussions with ASIO about the risk of a terror attack on Bali.

In its submission to the inquiry ASIO said Qantas had asked the spy agency on July 5, 2002 whether the threat to its interests could be lower in Bali than in Jakarta. ASIO had replied that the general threat to Qantas interests "cannot sensibly be differentiated from the general threat to Australian interests in Indonesia".

Confronted by this evidence, Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer initially attempted to deny it altogether. On the morning of May 5 he stated that the government was not aware of approaches that Qantas may have made to ASIO about travel advisory warnings. He also asserted that the head of ASIO, Dennis Richardson, had denied that Qantas made any approach.

Just three hours later, Prime Minister John Howard contradicted Downer. He said he had been told that Richardson had rejected a request from Qantas for a separate warning for Bali, compared to the rest of Indonesia. Choosing his words carefully, Howard claimed, however, that Richardson did not consider the request an attempt to pressure the government. He further denied that Qantas had lobbied him or Downer or their departments.

Howard also declared that his government would not alter travel advisories in response to pressure from anybody, because the advisories were designed to "protect and help Australians". For its part, Qantas was equally adamant in its denials. Qantas head of group security Geoff Askew said the airline did not in any way seek to influence the threat assessment for Indonesia, and described the suggestion as preposterous.

The fact remains, however, that the official advisories, while suggesting that travellers to Indonesia have regard for "personal security awareness", described Bali as "calm" and "normal". Moreover, Qantas continued to fly hundreds of passengers there every day.

Adelaide magistrate Brian Deegan, whose son Joshua died in the Bali bombings, said he had instigated the Senate inquiry's summons to Qantas. "I knew that something was wrong," he told Sky News Australia. "I am aware that Qantas—one of the executives I would suggest—attended on ASIO and asked the ASIO chief what the terrorism targetting would rate and he was told it was high right through Indonesia and Bali could not be differentiated for any reason."

Deegan said Qantas should not have kept flying to Bali. "This is reckless disregard for human life, if what Dennis Richardson said is

true,” he said. Deegan said the issue arose at a time when Qantas was trying to combat a downturn in air traffic to Asia.

Despite the trauma of losing his son, Deegan has become a courageous and articulate opponent of the government and its foreign policy, accusing it of covering up its responsibility for the deaths. In a November 2002 open letter to Howard, he asked: “Why did our children die and why have many others been sickeningly maimed? Was it because we, as a nation, have pursued a role in the US-led war on terror that we cannot possibly fulfil?” He also asked: “To what extent was your government aware of imminent danger to our citizens prior to October 12? After all, the US was reportedly well aware and it apparently alerted your government.”

Deegan recently announced that in the forthcoming federal election, he will stand as an independent against Downer in the foreign minister’s local electorate of Mayo.

In recent weeks, a series of high-level intelligence and military leaks has shaken the Howard government, with senior officers accusing it of suppressing and distorting intelligence reports for its own political purposes. One leaked top-secret document was a letter written to Howard by a former high-ranking Army intelligence expert, Lieutenant Colonel Lance Collins demanding a royal commission into a litany of “poor performance or outright failures” by the intelligence agencies in recent years, including the Bali bombings.

In the midst of the ensuing furore, a report by the Rand Corporation, an influential Pentagon-linked US thinktank, accused ASIO of “blatantly disregarding” threat assessments relating to the Bali bombings. Interviewed on ABC radio, Rand analyst Peter Chalk said ASIO had apparently failed to act on widely available intelligence about Islamic extremists operating in Indonesia.

ABC radio also reported that an ONA analyst had identified Bali as a potential terror target at least three times, including in a briefing to Downer in June before the bombing and at a CIA seminar the previous April. The ONA officer, David Farmer, stated: “As part of that seminar we had a scenario planning exercise to try and identify where Al Qaeda would be in the future, to build a case for our argument as a scenario we actually used Al Qaeda elements linking up with terrorists in South-East Asia and attacking Bali as a means to describe that particular scenario.”

ONA had already disclosed to the Senate committee aspects of the personal briefing given to Downer on June 18 and 19, 2002. The agency admitted that: “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.”

Despite all the evidence, Howard and Downer have continued, with the help of a compliant media, to maintain that they had no prior warning and bear no responsibility for the Bali tragedy. Their latest evasions and back-tracking follow a consistent pattern of cover-up. In the immediate aftermath of the bombings, Howard, who was confronted by growing public anger, particularly among victims’ families, established an inquiry by William Blick, the inspector general of Intelligence and Security.

In his report, 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 an obvious whitewash that the further

Senate inquiry had to be convened. No minister has been called to appear before the Senate committee—a clear indication that its findings, due next month, will not seek to challenge the government’s conduct. Yet, the latest disclosures suggest that the government’s lies are unravelling, just like its fabrications over the Iraq war.

While it is quite possible that the profit concerns of Qantas—one of Australia’s largest corporations—were a factor in the government’s contempt for the safety of ordinary people in Bali, other motives may also have been involved. There is no doubt that Australia’s participation in the war on Afghanistan contributed to Bali becoming a target for Islamic extremists. There is also no doubt that the government seized on the atrocities—describing them as Australia’s own “September 11”—to carry through far-reaching shifts in domestic and foreign policy.

Almost immediately, Howard began using the Bali events to help justify dispatching Australian troops to join the US-led war on Iraq. In the face of the largest antiwar protests in Australian history, he cynically exploited the tragedy to bolster Washington’s case for its illegal invasion and occupation of the country.

This was followed in short order by the dispatch of Australian soldiers and police to the Solomon Islands, also in the name of combatting terrorism. The real purpose was to establish Australia’s colonial-style control over the impoverished islands and assert its hegemony over the southwest Pacific.

Domestically, the bombings were used to justify sweeping attacks on democratic rights. Violent dawn raids on the homes of Islamic working class families were followed by the passage of new laws giving ASIO unprecedented powers to secretly detain and interrogate people without trial, simply on the suspicion that they may have information about terrorism. In the eighteen months since the bombings, the government has continued to strengthen the police state-style anti-terror legislation, with the opposition Labor party’s support, and boosted the powers and resources of the security agencies.

Given the array of evidence demonstrating that the government and its key security agencies—ASIO, ONA and DIO—knew of a likely attack in Bali, the question must again be posed: did the Australian government consciously choose to ignore the warnings?



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