

Australian foreign minister smears journalist kidnapped in Iraq

Richard Phillips
27 October 2004

When Iraqi resistance fighters recently kidnapped John Martinkus, an Australian SBS television journalist and filmmaker, the Howard government responded with a vicious smear campaign against the 35-year-old reporter.

Four armed men seized Martinkus in Baghdad on October 16. He was interrogated and threatened before being released 20 hours later, after convincing his captors that he was an independent journalist and opposed the invasion of Iraq.

Martinkus, who is critical of the Howard government, has recently written *Travels in American Iraq*, a book about the US-led invasion, and authored paperbacks on the Indonesian military's terror campaigns in Aceh and West Papua. His captors apparently decided to release him after verifying his identity, and some of his articles, on the Internet.

When informed of Martinkus' kidnapping, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer suggested that the well-respected journalist was partly to blame. Downer told the media that Martinkus was captured because he "went to a part of Baghdad that he was advised not to go to, but he went there anyway".

In fact, the journalist was seized at 2 p.m. near his hotel, which was located across the road from the Australian Embassy. The car in which he was traveling had just left the Hamra Hotel, turned right and only traveled 500 metres when it was blocked by two cars—back and front—and the journalist seized.

The media did not challenge Downer, who provided no evidence to substantiate his allegations. But straight after his release, Martinkus demanded the foreign minister immediately apologise for claiming that he had entered a no-go area.

The SBS journalist explained that he had been captured just near the embassy, where Australian diplomats and journalists live and work, and where the Australian military was responsible for securing. "[F]or this to

happen in that area means that they've had a serious breach of security.... If it's not safe there, it's not safe anywhere." Martinkus explained that his captors had told him that he had been tailed for three days and that they were able to observe all his movements.

The journalist rejected claims by the interim Iraqi government national security adviser Mufaq al-Rubaie that there was "no anti-Australian sentiment in Iraq" and that he had probably been released because he was Australian. Martinkus told SBS television that his captors had made it clear that he had been kidnapped precisely because Australia was a member of Washington's "coalition of the willing".

Martinkus told an airport press conference, upon returning to Australia, that he "understood" why civilian contractors were being kidnapped and executed.

"They're fighting a war but they're not savages," he said. "They're not actually just killing people willy-nilly. They talk to you, they think about things. (From their perspective) there was a reason to kill (British hostage Kenneth) Bigley, there was a reason to kill the Americans; there was not a reason to kill me (and) luckily I managed to convince them of that."

When asked if he thought Iraq was on the "road to recovery", Martinkus bluntly replied: "No, it's on the road to s—t."

Determined to divert attention from these politically embarrassing issues, Downer seized on Martinkus' comments on the executions claiming that they demonstrated that the reporter supported the beheading of civilians and was "giving the terrorists comfort".

Continuing his big lie technique, Downer told a Melbourne radio station that Martinkus was "suggesting that it might be okay to execute particular types of people, or to take particular types of people, but not others". This is "pretty close to the most appalling thing any Australian has said about the situation in Iraq," he said.

Martinkus, supported by SBS news director Phil Martin, quickly rebuffed Downer's slanderous claims and condemned the executions as "monstrous". He explained, however, that the Iraqi resistance considered anyone associated with the US-led occupying forces as a target.

"Even the most insignificant, lowly paid people who are working for the coalition, such as those 12 Nepalese who were killed on the way to Baghdad, even they are seen as legitimate targets and it's terrible.

"You can't condone this kind of behaviour. However, all I was trying to say was, from the perspective of the Iraqi resistance fighters who are carrying out these attacks, they are trying to bring the occupation to a halt and they are trying to do that through acts of terror such as publicly murdering people in order to prevent people going to Iraq to work for the coalition."

"Of course, like any sane human being, I deplore some of their methods and I wasn't in any way implying that Ken Bigley or the American hostages taken with him deserve their fate."

Despite these clear statements, Downer's distortion was repeated in Murdoch's Melbourne *Herald Sun* and other newspapers.

Herald Sun columnist Andrew Bolt claimed that Martinkus had been released because he was a "friend of the resistance". A letter published in the *Australian* by Steve Pratt, a Liberal MP in the Australian Capital Territory parliament, accused Martinkus of "encouraging" and "making excuses" for the executioners.

Pratt, a former Australian Army major and later CARE charity worker has close ties with Australian intelligence. He was arrested and jailed on espionage charges by Serbian authorities during the NATO attack on Yugoslavia in 1999.

Not content with denouncing Martinkus, Pratt went on to accuse the state-funded SBS network of being anti-American, with a "leftist international agenda", and demanded Martinkus' sacking from the television station.

Downer and Pratt's denunciations are typical of the Howard government, which cannot allow any serious discussion about the illegal character of the occupation or the reasons for the growing Iraqi resistance to the US military and its allies. Any attempt to explain the reasons for the kidnappings and executions is immediately characterised as support. This, in turn, is then used to try and intimidate and silence journalists such as Martinkus, or any others who refuse to toe the official line.

Last year, in the aftermath of the US-led invasion,

Richard Alston, Howard's communications minister, launched a witch hunt against *AM*, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's radio news program, claiming that it was "anti-American" and opposed to the invasion of Iraq. While ABC management eventually rejected the allegations, Alston's campaign was aimed at suppressing any signs of objective reportage at the state-funded network.

One of the more recent figures accused by Downer of "giving comfort to the terrorists" was Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty. Following the terrorist attack in Spain last March, the police commissioner inadvertently stated the obvious on national television: that military involvement in the Bush administration's assault on Iraq had made Australia and its citizens a target for terrorist attack.

Keelty, who later recanted his comment, was immediately censured by Howard's chief of staff and then publicly criticised by Defence Minister Robert Hill, armed forces chief General Peter Cosgrove and Downer.

The foreign minister's response to the Martinkus kidnapping constitutes yet another damning indictment of the Howard government. While Downer and his Department of Foreign Affairs regularly issue media releases on Iraq, there was no official press statement on the capture of Martinkus. The government appears to have been more concerned about his possible release, than about his possible fate at the hands of the kidnapers.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact