

Australian government's "terror alert" in Aceh backfires

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Since September 11, 2001, one of the standard operating procedures of the Howard government has been to ramp up fears of terrorism whenever it has been in political trouble.

In the lead-up to last year's federal election, for example, a string of terrorist charges were suddenly laid against Muslims, amid lurid media headlines about "terror cells" operating inside the country. Many months later, no evidence has yet been produced of any such "cells" and several of the accused men have been released on bail, because judges were not convinced that they represented any threat to the community.

The latest effort, which involved the issuing of yet another vague and unsubstantiated "terror alert" last Saturday, has backfired rather quickly.

Claiming to have received dire intelligence reports, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer warned that unidentified terrorists might be planning to attack foreign aid workers in Indonesia's tsunami-devastated Aceh region.

"New information [has been] received by the government concerning possible terrorist planning for attacks against foreigners involved in relief efforts," Downer claimed in a statement. "The government is working closely with Indonesian authorities and other governments involved in the relief effort to address this new threat information."

Simultaneously, Downer's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) posted a travel advisory insisting that because of "recently received new information", only large, recognised agencies with comprehensive security plans and Indonesian military support should stay. All others, particularly individuals seeking to "participate in humanitarian relief efforts", should get out. No details were provided, initially throwing a number of aid agencies into disarray.

Prime Minister John Howard weighed in personally, damning those allegedly responsible for the threat. "It is immensely distressing that at a time like this, people should be threatening violence and terrorism," he said during a visit to New Zealand. "It is a reminder of who we are dealing with. It is beyond the pale in every sense of the word, given

the absolute horror that the people of Aceh have been through." The threats of violence by terrorists were "a reminder of the depraved human beings they are".

But within hours, both the Indonesian and US governments dismissed Canberra's claims. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who held a press conference in Aceh late on Saturday, said there was "no evidence" of any threat to aid workers. The head of the Indonesian military's relief operations in Aceh, General Bambang Darmono, said he had "never heard" anything about it. Asked if he had received any information on the matter from Australian intelligence or military forces, he replied "none".

A spokesman for the United States embassy in Jakarta, Max Kwak, said the US had been told the Australian information was not new. "We will not be changing our travel warnings or anything like that," he told the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The government was left floundering, with Downer's spokesman, Chris Kenny, saying: "We put the warning out there in good faith, and we stand by it. I can't talk specifically about this piece of information, but you can rest assured we would share information like this with the Indonesians."

The Howard government may well have specific reasons for trying to discourage unaffiliated aid workers from travelling to Aceh. After all, its own military and AusAID operations in Aceh are being conducted in close collaboration with the Indonesian military, which has been engaged for years in a vicious war to suppress separatist sentiment in the oil-rich province.

However, the timing of the dramatic "alert" points to more immediate political considerations. This weekend, another election is looming—this time in the resource-rich state of Western Australia, where Howard is campaigning this week in a last-ditch effort to unseat the incumbent Labor government. The alert also served Howard's purposes in New Zealand, where he and Prime Minister Helen Clark declared their mutual commitment to fighting the "war on

terrorism”.

At the same time, just four months after winning last October’s federal election, the Howard government confronts major economic and political problems. Not the least is the collapse of the other major scare campaign that it mounted during the 2004 election campaign: that the return of a federal Labor government would see interest rates rise, causing acute financial difficulties for families with huge mortgage debts.

Just 24 hours before the Aceh “alert”, Ian McFarlane the governor of the Reserve Bank, which sets official interest rates, confirmed that rates were likely to rise over the next few months. Further, he warned that Australians would experience years of lower economic growth rates. McFarlane specifically criticised government policy for encouraging over-investment in the overheated real estate market, which has been the basis for the debt-driven bubble economy under Howard.

Speaking for the corporate establishment, the bank chief demanded that the government bring forward a range of unpopular measures to further slash working conditions and enrich the wealthiest layers of society: new tax incentives for business, proposals to push people off welfare and into work, and plans to drive up productivity rates.

Recent weeks have been dominated by fresh revelations exposing the government’s lies and coverup on the Iraq war and prisoner abuse. Released Guantánamo Bay detainee Mamdouh Habib has given details of Australian officials being present while he was beaten and tortured, while former top-level weapons inspector in Iraq, Rod Barton has refuted the “weapons of mass destruction” fabrications and blown the whistle on the involvement of Australian officials in the interrogation of Iraqi detainees.

The shocking case of Cornelia Rau, and the government’s refusal to apologise for the 10-month detention of the Australian woman, has re-ignited the opposition to the mandatory detention of asylum seekers, while leaked documents have uncovered blatant vote-buying by the government last year in the form of grants for dubious regional projects. Last week, a fresh scandal erupted over the expulsion of an Israeli diplomat.

By the weekend, media commentary began to appear for the first time since the federal election pointing to growing unease within the ruling coalition over Howard’s continued leadership. “Things could get worse for a leader who is increasingly seen to be out of touch with his Coalition colleagues,” Glenn Milne noted in the *Australian* on Monday. The newspaper’s chief political reporter, Steve Lewis, reported: “People want to know when he’s planning to go.”

It seems that (apart from Helen Clark) the only ones to

give the Aceh “alert” any credence were Labor leader Kim Beazley and his shadow foreign affairs minister, Kevin Rudd. Interviewed on the Channel Nine *Sunday* program, Beazley declared: “Well, if a government gets a threat like that you’ve got to take it seriously.”

Rudd went one better by solidarising himself with Howard’s efforts to demonise the alleged terrorists. He issued a media statement, which said: “It’s obscene that terrorists could potentially threaten Australian aid workers delivering humanitarian assistance in Aceh.”

This rush to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the government is no aberration. On every issue in recent weeks, Labor has striven to minimise the political damage to the government. It agreed to a cover-up inquiry by a former police commissioner into the Rau affair; joined the government in vilifying Habib and denying him the right to appear before a Senate committee to answer unsubstantiated allegations against him; and dropped its questioning of the government over Barton’s devastating accusations. And after receiving an intelligence briefing, Rudd told ABC radio that he would make no comment on the Israeli expulsion.

The underlying reason is not hard to fathom. Any unravelling of the government’s credibility on the “war on terrorism” would be just as damning for Labor. The party has aligned itself unconditionally behind the so-called war, backing the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (while advocating a UN resolution to legitimise the latter), stepped-up Australian military and police mobilisations in Indonesia and the Pacific, and the handing of police state-style powers to the security and intelligence agencies.

Its only criticisms of the Howard government have been that it has focussed too much on Iraq, while failing to pursue the “war” aggressively enough in the Asia-Pacific region, where Australian capitalism has major strategic and commercial interests. Thus, in his statement on the Aceh issue, Rudd said: “Australia has not yet won the war on terrorism in South East Asia and this most recent warning, reflected in DFAT’s Travel Advisory, is a timely reminder that Australia must develop a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy for South East Asia.”



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