

Britain: Police shoot-to-kill policy part of onslaught against democratic rights

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The gunning down of Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes on a London subway carriage has tragically exposed the shoot-to-kill policy secretly adopted by Britain's police.

Without even a debate in parliament, the British state has taken upon itself the power to execute anyone as it sees fit. The first time such powers were exercised, an entirely innocent man was shot eight times at extremely close range, seven times in the head.

It has now emerged that this policy has been developed over the past two years under the code-name "Operation Kratos," after the Greek god of strength. Under its remit, a senior police officer is on standby 24 hours a day at Scotland Yard, the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), with the authority to deploy special armed squads to follow and, if deemed necessary, shoot dead suspected suicide bombers.

Previous guidelines covering police use of firearms had stipulated that, with few exceptions, the objective was to stop and disable a suspect by aiming at the chest. Under Operation Kratos, however, police are now authorised to use lethal force by aiming their shots at the head.

Former MPS head Lord Stevens revealed last week that the shoot-to-kill policy was developed when he led Scotland Yard, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on New York.

Circulated secretly for the first time in 2003, the material was shared with anti-terrorist officers, protection and surveillance units, and a small group of senior commanders, but was not disseminated to the wider police force.

According to the *Financial Times*, an internal e-mail was sent to specialised police units, including armed officers, reminding them of the secret instructions for dealing with suspected suicide bombers.

The newspaper quotes a police source saying, "The e-mail reminded armed officers they could shoot to the head

if the criteria for suspecting a suicide bomber was fulfilled. It [the action] had to be based on intelligence."

The policy was also kept secret from the Muslim Advisory Group (MAG), a Whitehall committee of key Muslim community leaders with which the police and politicians had been meeting to "build up trust and co-operation" after the September 11 attacks.

As media reports emerged of a visit to Israel in 2002 by MPS officers, the MAG had sought assurances from David Veness, then head of anti-terrorist operations, that the same shoot-to-kill tactics would not be deployed in the UK.

Massoud Shadareh of the Islamic Human Rights Commission said, "No one told us the police had been given effective *carte-blanche* to shoot dead on suspicion."

Asked at last week's press conference whether he had approved the new guidelines, Prime Minister Tony Blair said he was unsure if it "ever came across my desk." Describing it as a "sensible policy" necessary to "protect the public" (something it so clearly failed to do in the case of de Menezes), Blair said he "could not remember" if he had discussed it. But if police had talked to him about it, "I would have agreed with what they said."

The prime minister told the July 26 press conference that granting the police the power to use lethal force was "more a sort of common sense response to the situation rather than some great change of policy."

Unlike many countries, Britain's police officers have not been routinely armed. Indeed, the image the state usually likes to project is one of "community policing," the friendly neighbourhood bobby who is more like a concerned parent than someone authorised to "terminate with extreme prejudice."

The introduction of a shoot-to-kill policy, far from representing "common sense," is a further erosion of basic democratic rights that effectively dispenses with long-established legal norms. Just 40 years after Britain

abolished the death penalty, an armed police officer is now empowered to be judge, jury and executioner.

The events surrounding the de Menezes shooting and the London bombings are being used as the pretext to implement further long-planned attacks on civil liberties.

The political establishment has closed ranks, and the government is seeking support for a new anti-terror bill that will be rushed through parliament following the summer recess. Blair said he was pleased with the “cross-party consensus” following his July 26 meeting with opposition party leaders Michael Howard (Conservative Party) and Charles Kennedy (Liberal Democrats). “I think when the main political parties present a united front then it sends an important signal to the terrorists of our strength and our determination and our unity to defeat them,” Blair told the press.

The prime minister confirmed that the government was drawing up a bill creating several new offences: acts preparatory to terrorism, indirect incitement to commit a terrorist offence, receiving or giving training in the use of hazardous substances or other methods and techniques for terrorist purposes in the UK and abroad.

Blair also expressed sympathy for the lengthening of time a terrorist suspect could be held without charge from 14 days to three months, as has been requested by the police.

In what potentially constitutes a far-reaching assault on democratic rights and free speech, Blair said he has been discussing with the police and security services “the use of intercepts as evidence...the powers that are necessary to deal with these extremist bookshops and the publications that can incite terrorism, the use of the Internet to promote and encourage terrorist activity.”

In a veiled warning to the judiciary against striking down any parts of the new anti-terror legislation—as the Law Lords had done last year, finding that the indefinite detention of foreign terror suspects was a breach of their human rights—Blair said he doubted “whether those words would be uttered now.” Since the London bombings, there was “a different mood today.”

On July 20, just one day before an apparently failed second attempt to bomb London’s transport network, Home Secretary Charles Clarke announced that the government is to establish a global database of “extremists” who face automatic vetting before being allowed into the UK.

In a statement to parliament, he said, “In the circumstances we now face, I have decided that it is right to broaden the use of these powers to deal with those who

foment terrorism or seek to provoke others to terrorist acts.

“I intend to draw up a list of unacceptable behaviours which would fall into this—for example preaching, running web sites or writing articles which are intended to foment or provoke terrorism.”

On July 21, Prime Minister Tony Blair met with the civil contingencies committee, which includes security chiefs from MI5, MI6 and the Association of Chief Police Officers. Named “Cobra” after the Cabinet Office Briefing Room A in Downing Street where it usually meets, the committee has the power to implement emergency measures contained in part two of the Civil Contingencies Act. This allows for the suspension of parliament, restrictions on freedom of assembly and of movement, and the mobilisation of the armed forces.

A spying network that will operate throughout the “Muslim community” is also to be established, according to Vikram Dodd in the *Guardian*. Entitled “Special intelligence units are being planned across Britain,” the July 20 article states that Muslims are to be monitored “community by community,” under the pretext of rooting out and thwarting “extremists.”

The article states, “The *Guardian* has learned that the special squads, to be known as Muslim Contact Units and staffed by Special Branch officers, will be established in areas including Yorkshire, north-west England and parts of the Midlands.”

Dodd quotes a “senior police officer with knowledge of the scheme” who said, “It’s about policing, it’s not just about being nice to communities. You protect them against Islamophobia, and work with Muslims to protect them against extremists.” He added, “It is not about spying.”



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