

Britain: media defend state killing, police chief warns more to come

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Jean Charles de Menezes, the 27-year-old Brazilian slain by police last week in a London subway carriage, was shot eight times at point blank range—seven times in the head and once in the neck.

This information was revealed at a coroners' inquiry into de Menezes' death, which opened and adjourned on Monday. The *Financial Times* reported one police source as stating de Menezes "was shot so many times he was beyond recognition."

That the young electrician was the victim of an officially-sanctioned policy of state execution is beyond doubt. It is now known that two years ago, under the guise of the war against terror, police secretly adopted the shoot-to-kill policy carried out to such deadly effect in the capital last week.

Lord Stevens, who was the Metropolitan Police Commissioner at the time, said the policy was in line with the practices of security forces in Israel and Sri Lanka. Experience in these countries showed, Stevens said, "There is only one sure way to stop a suicide bomber determined to fulfill his mission: destroy his brain instantly, utterly."

But de Menezes was not a suicide bomber, and police had no grounds to conclude that he was. When he left for work last Friday morning, the young man had no way of knowing plain clothes police were staking out the communal entrance to the block of flats where he lived. Nor could he know that during his half-hour journey to the Stockwell subway station he was being covertly followed by an armed police unit, dressed in civilian garb, because his clothing had aroused their "suspicions."

De Menezes would only have become aware his life was threatened when, as he entered the subway, a group of heavily armed males suddenly began shouting and chasing him. Eyewitnesses to his shooting have said that the men did not identify themselves as police. Small wonder that the young worker looked like a "cornered rabbit" as he sought refuge in a train carriage. As he was wrestled to the ground and pinned down by at least two men, whilst another placed a gun to his temple, one can only imagine his final terrified thoughts.

De Menezes' padded jacket, considered "inappropriate" for this time of year, was apparently all it took for police to "destroy his brain instantly."

All the more chilling is Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair's warning that more innocent people could be

gunned down. "Somebody else could be shot," he said, "but everything is done to make it right."

Prime Minister Tony Blair defended the shooting, insisting that the "police are doing their job in very, very difficult circumstances, and I think it is important that we give them every support."

De Menezes' cold-blooded slaying has shocked millions who rightly sense that it marks the beginning of a dark and disturbing chapter in British history—one in which armed death squads can operate with impunity across the UK.

Their concerns find no echo in the British media, however, which has rushed to defend the new "realities" of modern-day policing.

Writing in Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper, night editor David Dinsmore opined that whilst sympathy for de Menezes' family was understandable, "I feel sorry for the cop who pulled trigger." Everyone makes "mistakes" in the course of their work, he continued, "but while most of us can walk away from our mistakes relatively unscathed, those [police officers] involved [in de Menezes' shooting] can now expect to be charged, face losing their jobs and even going to jail."

"It is exactly this kind of nonsense that cannot be allowed to happen," Dinsmore continued. "Bin Laden must be rubbing his hands in glee as the liberal lawyers begin sharpening their pens ready to dash off the writs...Every politician in the country needs to have the conviction to get behind our policemen at this crucial time or we may as well surrender to the terrorists now."

In truth, the officer involved in de Menezes' death has not even been suspended pending further investigation, but simply moved to other duties, and an inquiry by the Independent Police Complaints Commission is expected to take months to report. The IPCC has already stated that its investigation will not "start from the assumption" that any crime has been committed.

To date, most human rights organisations have remained silent. The civil rights organisation Liberty, for example, has said it will not "rush to judgement"—a courtesy that was tragically not afforded to de Menezes.

What Dinsmore is really arguing is that at no time and on no account should the state be held to account for de Menezes' death, nor any other action taken in the name of the "war against terror." Those who demand otherwise are giving in to

the terrorists.

Contempt for civil liberties is not confined to the right-wing press. Writing in the *Guardian* on July 25, Peter Preston insisted, “Stockwell is not the place for a soapbox.”

Making mistakes was not a crime, he wrote regarding the police shooting. “Simple, inevitable fallibility” was a “basic law of the human condition.”

“Stuff happens,” he declared, implying that the state execution of an innocent man is no big deal. “We’re crazy to rush on to soapboxes when it does,” he added.

According to Preston, there can be no discussion of de Menezes’ death and its implications. Instead, people must accept such horrors as a fact of life and move on.

An editorial in the *Independent* expressed the desire that the police officers involved in the shooting not be “scapegoated.” Dismissing concerns that the young electrician’s death “showed that we now have a trigger-happy police force,” it argued, “All the evidence points in the opposite direction.” Eight bullets pumped into the head of an innocent man is not evidence enough for the *Independent*.

Whilst all the newspapers agreed there should be no questioning of the police, no such restrictions apply to the victim. *Independent* columnist Bruce Anderson was perhaps the most insistent in this regard.

“Anyone who behaves as Mr. de Menezes did can not have been keeping abreast of current affairs,” Anderson wrote. “His conduct invited the police to draw the conclusions which they did and to act as they did. He was the author of his own misfortune.”

According to Anderson, de Menezes was asking for it. He should have realized that the war on terror had granted police a license to target anyone with brown skin dressed in a warm coat.

Just when one thought Anderson had plumbed the depths of political depravity, there was the *Guardian*. In its leader of July 25, “Death of an Innocent Man,” the *Guardian* commented, “[T]he biggest mistake the police made was not the most obvious one of shooting the wrong man ...

“The biggest mistake was not to properly prepare the public for the sustained campaign of violence facing the country. Even when Mr. Menezes was thought to be a bomber, witnesses were shocked by the ferocity with which he was killed. More should have been done to prepare the public for the forceful response needed to protect them.”

In other words, revulsion at de Menezes’ murder showed that the public had not been sufficiently “bloodied” beforehand to accept extra-judicial executions, and more efforts needed to be made towards this end.

Whatever the particulars surrounding de Menezes’ shooting, his death is being used retroactively precisely to condition public opinion to accept the militarisation and brutalisation of daily life.

No other conclusion can be drawn from the fact that the

government and the security forces have surreptitiously remodeled law-and-order policies along the lines of Israel and Sri Lanka—two countries whose ruling elites have prosecuted a savage, decades-long civil war against Palestinians and Tamils respectively.

This points to another reality of Blair’s Britain: the huge social polarization that now exists. In recent decades, successive governments have carried out policies aimed at benefiting a tiny privileged elite at the expense of the broad mass of working people.

In Britain, private capital has been given the go-ahead to loot the vital resources—health, education, housing—on which millions depend. Social benefits have been all but eradicated and wage rates slashed to amongst the lowest in Western Europe. Social inequality is now the greatest on record as a consequence.

This has been accompanied by a turn to imperialist war and neo-colonialism. From the Balkans, to Africa, to the Middle East, Britain’s ruling class seek once again to subjugate the former colonies, so as to more effectively exploit their peoples and resources.

The *Guardian* and the *Independent* speak for a narrow segment of the upper-middle-class that has materially benefited from these policies and is reconciled to their consequences.

Nothing progressive can be expected from such quarters. Opposition to the creeping imposition of a police state depends on the active and independent intervention of working people and all those committed to the defence of democratic rights, through the organisation of protests, demonstrations and meetings to demand an end to state terror and the holding to account of all those responsible for preparing and commissioning the policy that led to de Menezes’ shooting.



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