Howard's terrorist "alert" leads to

Politically manipulated police raids in Australia

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In the largest such operation yet seen in Australia—reportedly involving 850 federal and state police and intelligence personnel—heavily-armed officers burst into at least 23 homes in Sydney and Melbourne in the pre-dawn hours of yesterday morning and arrested 17 Islamic men on vague and unspecified terrorism charges. Today, raids are still continuing in Sydney, amid angry protests by family members.

One arrested man, Omar Baladjam, a former television actor, was critically wounded. He was shot in the neck by police in the outer Sydney suburb of Green Valley, in conditions eerily reminscent of the July 22 London police killing of innocent Brazilian-born electrician Jean Charles de Menezes. Police claimed that Baladjam pulled a gun and fired on them. Baladjam was wearing a backpack that police tested for explosive materials before admitting that none were found.

Seven other men were seized in Sydney's south-western suburbs, while nine men were arrested across Melbourne's northern suburbs, both working class areas with high immigrant populations.

All the circumstances surrounding the massive raids point to them being politically manipulated to justify last week's terrorist "alert" declared by Prime Minister John Howard and the unprecedented police-state measures being pushed through federal and state parliaments on the pretext of combatting terrorism.

Police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) had been closely monitoring the men for nearly 18 months, using phone taps, physical surveillance and previous house raids, but suddenly brought forward the arrests just five days after Howard's declaration.

So intense was the surveillance that one senior officer told journalists: "We had been watching these guys, listening to them and following them for 18 months. They were right under our noses and they knew it too." This raises the obvious question: what was the urgent need to arrest the group?

From Howard's viewpoint, the timing could not have been better. The decision to move against them came amid mounting public sceptism and media questioning about why his claim of a terrorist emergency had not produced arrests.

Just a day before the raids, the Murdoch media had reported that his Newspoll opinion ratings had slumped to their poorest levels since 2001. His personal satisfaction had fallen to 41 percent—almost as low as US President George W. Bush. This reflected the growing public hostility to Howard's far-reaching industrial relations legislation and emerging unease over the draconian Anti-Terrorism Bill 2005, as well as underlying opposition to the Iraq war.

In 2001, Howard responded to disastrous poll ratings by sending naval gunships to turn back refugee boats, accompanied by a lying demonisation campaign against refugees, and by exploiting the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States to join the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. There is every indication that once again, assisted by the Labor Party, he is resorting to similar methods.

Within hours of the police-ASIO swoops, before charges were even laid, let alone evidence produced in court, Howard, the state Labor premiers and the mainstream media proclaimed that the arrests vindicated the "urgent" terrorism laws amendments rushed through a specially recalled Senate last Thursday. These changes were the first component of the Anti-Terrorism Bill, which Howard and the Labor leaders want to have enacted by next month.

Throughout yesterday, Howard, the Labor leaders and police chiefs carried out a wall-to-wall media blitz, competing with each other to claim credit for the operation and to paint the arrested men's supposed plans in the most alarming possible light. New South Wales Police Commissioner Ken Moroney and his Police Minister Carl Scully, for example, claimed to have "disrupted a large-scale operation which, had it been allowed to go through to fruition, we certainly believe would have been catastrophic".

Some media outlets had been given details of the raids in advance and were on the spot with camera crews and reporters to publicise the dramatic use of police bullet-proof vests, helicopters and dogs. The Murdoch media did its best to poison the atmosphere by running inflammatory headlines. The Sydney *Daily Telegraph* proclaimed: "Holy war on Australia—17 arrested as terror network smashed."

These unsubstantiated allegations entirely overturn the presumption of innocence and directly prejudice the trials of the accused men. In fact, the comments are so brazen that they could amount to contempt of court, prompting defence lawyers to call for copies of media transcripts.

Like ordinary members of the public, the WSWS has no means to independently test the police accusations. But judging by the lack of specific charges laid against the men, and by what police and intelligence officers said about the evidence against them, the allegations are flimsy and full of apparent contradictions.

Asked if she agreed with her NSW counterpart Ken Moroney that the suspects were in the "final stage of a large scale terrorist attack" Victorian Police Commissioner Christine Nixon revealed that "we weren't exactly sure when, nor more importantly, what they planned to damage or do harm to". She said the group to which the men belonged "doesn't have a name" and "had no specific target in

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mind".

In other words, despite lurid Murdoch media claims of plots to blow up the Sydney Harbour Bridge and other landmarks, the police had no concrete evidence of any terrorist plan.

This is reflected in the charges laid against the nine Melbourne men. They have been charged with being members of a terrorist organisation, which has no name and seemingly consists only of themselves. For this they face 10 to 25 years jail. Because of the amendments to the terrorist laws passed by the Senate last week, the police and the prosecution can allege that an organisation is terrorist without evidence of preparation for any specific terrorist act.

Defence lawyer Rob Stary said none of his clients had been charged in relation to the planning of any attack, nor did any of the material taken from their homes relate to an attack.

The alleged leader of the conspiracy, Abdul Nacer Benbrika (also known as Abu Bakr), has hardly been secretive about his Islamic fundamentalist beliefs, giving television interviews in his home last August. Last year, he also told ABC radio that ASIO had tried to recruit him as an informer on some of his religious students. This further points to longstanding ASIO monitoring and attempted entrapment of Benbrika and his followers.

In Sydney, no details have even been released about the charges, and the prisoners have not yet appeared in court. According to some media reports, they have been charged with a conspiracy, dated May 1, to prepare and plan a terrorist act, namely to manufacture explosives, an offence that carries a life sentence. If this is so, it suggests that the security agencies have abruptly acted on information they have possessed for at least six months.

Whatever the facts turn out to be, conspiracy is a notoriously vague and open-ended charge, the breadth of which has been further expanded by last week's amendments. In what may be a move to cover up weaknesses and inconsistencies in the official story, Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty said the Commonwealth Director of Prosecutions would apply to suppress the details of the allegations because of the ongoing nature of the investigations.

Defence lawyer Adam Houda described the charges as "scandalous". He said: "There's no evidence that terrorism was contemplated or being planned by any particular person at any particular time or in any particular place." He also questioned the timing of the arrests. "These prosecutions are political and a great shame on this country."

In the current climate, all the prisoners are likely to be denied bail, meaning they will be locked away in solitary confinement for many months before the charges against them are clarified and they have the chance to defend themselves in court. By that time, the Anti-Terrorism Bill will already be law, introducing a vast array of extraordinary police powers, including two unprecedented forms of detention without any trial at all—"preventative detention" and "control orders".

Last night, Howard denied that he was playing politics. "When it comes to the safety of the Australian people and the security of this country there is no room for political manipulation. And I have not sought to do that in relation to this issue and I will not in the future." This is from the leader of a government that has repeatedly fabricated allegations—from "children overboard" to "weapons of mass destruction"—to justify war and police-military repression.

The immediate and transparent purpose of the current operation is to silence the emerging opposition to the Anti-Terrorism Bill. Howard and the Labor premiers had originally hoped to push its measures through their parliaments with virtually no discussion following their agreement at the September 27 "counter-terrorism" summit. Federal Labor leader Kim Beazley had made it plain that he was in full support.

Their plans were somewhat disrupted when ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope, for his own political reasons, posted a copy of a secret draft of the Bill on his official website. This allowed ordinary people to see its draconian details for the first time. An outpouring of objections began in letters to newspapers, leading to nervousness among government and Labor MPs.

The hoped-for impact of the police raids on so-called small "l" liberal sections of the media can be guaged by today's editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which had earlier expressed reservations about the Anti-Terrorism Bill. Even as it noted that "the details of what is alleged against the 16 are unclear," it declared that "a threshold in Australia's historical experience has been crossed ... the event marks a new and frightening stage in the war on terrorism," in which "the public must take on trust the government's assertions".

By this logic, every utterance of the government and its security chiefs should now be accepted without question. Next month's passage of the Bill will pave the way for secret detentions, semi-permanent house arrests, the outlawing of "urging dissaffection" with the government and jail terms for lawyers and journalists who alert the public to political internments. The government has also used last week's terrorist "alert" to bring forward plans for expanded powers to call-out the military against civilian unrest.

Another chilling measure was railroaded through federal parliament this week without any noticeable media coverage. Witnesses in terrorism cases will be able to give evidence by videolink under the Telecommunications (Interception) Amendment (Stored Communications and Other Measures) Act 2005. The Act makes it particularly difficult for accused to challenge the credibility of testimony by overseas prisoners, who may be under coercion. Justice Minister Chris Ellison told the Senate: "It ensures that the tough laws we have put in place to target terrorist activities are enforceable."

The WSWS has no agreement with Islamic fundamentalism. But the methods used in the current police-intelligence operation—demonisation, provocation, entrapment and frame-up, backed by media witchhunting—will be used against others in the future as hostility grows to the Iraq war, the assault on social conditions at home and the ripping up of basic legal and democratic rights.

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