

Australian “terror” raids target Tamil groups

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25 November 2005

For the second time this month, Australian police and security agencies have carried out politically-timed raids under the cover of combatting terrorism. On Wednesday, federal and Victorian state police raided an undisclosed number of homes and premises in Melbourne allegedly linked to Tamil organisations. They detained five people for interrogation before releasing them without charge.

Among the buildings targeted were homes of prominent Tamil-Australian citizens and newspaper publishers, a Tamil community centre and the offices of the Tamil Co-ordinating Committee. Police spokesman told the media that those raided were suspected of raising funds to support the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which is seeking a separate or autonomous state in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

The new raids demonstrate that the so-called “war on terrorism” is being used to cast a wide political net. Police representatives said the operation was not directly connected to the massive November 8 and 9 raids, in which 18 Muslim men were arrested and charged with vaguely worded offences, such as conspiring to plan terrorist activities. “In this latest case there was no plot to attack any target,” a police source told the media.

Nonetheless, the police bracketed the Tamil individuals with the earlier arrests and predicted that charges would follow. According to the *Australian*, “police hope the [latest] raids will eventually allow them to make arrests in the same way that raids on Melbourne properties in June paved the way for terror charges to be laid against the same people early this month”.

It is not known if the police used powers given to them in 2003 to secretly detain people without trial for interrogation. That is because anyone who reports the use of these powers can themselves be jailed. Instead, the *Melbourne Age* reported that it “believes the five were cooperative and eventually allowed to go home”.

There is no suggestion whatsoever that those targetted in the latest raids were preparing for any terrorist act in Australia. Nor has the government of Prime Minister John Howard even listed the LTTE as a terrorist organisation. Moreover, among the “objectionable material” reportedly seized in the raids were publicly advertised and freely available political books, such as *War and Peace: Armed Struggle and Peace Efforts of Liberation Tigers*, written by LTTE international spokesman Anton Balasingham.

The police and the media, however, most notably the Murdoch newspapers, have depicted the victims of the raids as likely supporters of bloody violence. Just as Murdoch’s *Australian* ran blazing headlines about “bombing plots” after the November 8-9 raids, it today described the LTTE as a “terrorist group” which was “waging a bloody war to create a separate homeland in Sri Lanka”. Its Melbourne stable mate, the *Herald Sun*, called the LTTE “one of the world’s most ruthless guerilla armies”.

While the *World Socialist Web Site* is fundamentally opposed to the LTTE’s political program and aims, it is a bourgeois nationalist organisation that was formed in the 1970s in response to entrenched and systematic anti-Tamil discrimination. The primary responsibility for the bloody civil war that has claimed more than 65,000 lives lies, not with the LTTE, but with the successive governments in Colombo that rested on the ideology of Sinhala supremacism, instigated the pogroms that led to the conflict in 1983 and ruthlessly prosecuted the war for two decades until the ceasefire signed in 2002.

The raids, the first ever directed against Tamil groups in Australia, appear to be timed for both domestic and international purposes. Internally, they have been conducted in the midst of a bid by the Howard government, in collusion with the state Labor governments, to push unprecedented “anti-terrorism” laws through federal and state parliaments.

These will introduce two new wide-ranging forms of detention without trial, as well as expanded sedition and “advocating terrorism” provisions directly aimed at silencing criticism of Australian military interventions and other government measures.

The raids were also launched in response to a request by the government in Sri Lanka, where the new president Mahinda Rajapakse, took office just four days earlier, on November 19. Rajapakse, previously the prime minister, heads an extremely shaky regime, with his widely discredited United Peoples Freedom Alliance holding less than a third of the seats in parliament.

In an attempt to divert discontent with his government’s broken promises to improve social conditions, Rajapakse has encouraged anti-Tamil communalism, vowing to “review” the ceasefire pact with the LTTE and to demand “honourable” terms for any peace deal. Throughout the just-completed

presidential election campaign he relied heavily for support upon the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, which has stridently opposed any concessions to the LTTE.

Sri Lankan authorities have been quick to claim credit for the Melbourne raids and signal that they form part of a new international campaign against the LTTE. A senior Sri Lankan official “expressed delight” with them, Sri Lanka’s *Island* reported yesterday. The right-wing newspaper cited “government sources” saying, “new Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera would play a crucial role in seeking further foreign assistance to curb overseas LTTE activities”.

Today’s *Australian* quoted the Sri Lankan Deputy High Commissioner Asoka Giriagama, who said his government had passed information to Australia about suspected fundraising by the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO), the main Tamil agency conducting post-tsunami aid operations in Sri Lanka’s north and east. “We have kept the Australian government very well informed about these activities,” he said.

True to form, the *Australian* headlined the story with claims that the TRO had misused charity donations given by Australians after the December 26 tsunami to fund the LTTE. The Australian president of the TRO, Dr Rajan Rasiah, rejected the allegations, pointing out that the TRO, as a signatory to an official Australian aid code of conduct, was audited by the Australian Securities and Investments Commission.

A Tamil community spokesman Ratnam Kandasamy said he feared a backlash against Tamils, similar to that experienced by Muslims since 2001. “My worry is that the Tamil community could be misunderstood and targetted like the Muslim community,” he told Australian Associated Press.

These raids take the Howard government’s police and intelligence offensive far beyond alleged links to Al Qaeda or other Islamic fundamentalist outfits. Nor will it end with repression of Tamil groups. By the same logic, supporters of any nationalist or anti-government movement overseas could be subjected to highly-publicised raids, interrogation, detention and lengthy imprisonment.

While the LTTE has not been outlawed in Australia, it has been listed by the United Nations—along with 404 other groups and individuals—as a “terrorist organisation with which financial dealings are restricted”. Others listed include Palestinian, Iraqi, Afghan, Kurdish, Irish, Peruvian, Spanish and Balkan groups. No evidence of “terrorism” is required to place organisations on this blacklist—it is a purely political process, with most listings initiated by Washington.

This has become a backdoor method of outlawing dissident organisations, with immense legal and political implications. Under Australia’s existing “counter-terrorism” legislation, introduced in 2002, listed groups can have their assets seized. Anyone associated with, or who donates funds to, them can face up to life imprisonment for financing terrorist activity.

One portion of the Anti-Terrorism Bill 2005, due to be rammed through parliament before Christmas, is designed to

make it far easier to prosecute people under these provisions, by allowing convictions for “recklessly” giving money to a terrorist group or for a terrorist project. This means that donors could be locked away even if they had no intention of supporting terrorism. In effect, the burden of proof will be imposed on donors to prove they did everything possible to investigate and ensure that their funds were being used for exclusively humanitarian purposes.

This week’s raids highlight another little-reported aspect of the “anti-terror” laws. The laws define terrorism in terms of threats to any government around the world. Whether they are dictatorial regimes, such as Burma, or colonial rulers, as in French-controlled New Caledonia, or major capitalist powers, including the United States, their administrations can call on Canberra to activate the laws against their political opponents, as the Sri Lankan government has done.

The latest police-ASIO operation also underscores the expanding range of mechanisms at the government’s disposal to outlaw political organisations, with dire consequences for members, supporters and donors. Apart from the “financing terrorism” laws, the government can ban organisations outright by executive fiat, or ask a court to rule that a group is “terrorist”. Through the sedition laws, it can also apply for an order declaring a grouping an “unlawful association”.

Each of these powers will be enhanced by the Anti-Terrorism Bill. The new legislation will make it possible to classify parties as “terrorist” without any evidence of planning or being involved in any specific terrorist act, or as “seditious” for urging anti-government “disaffection,” “ill-will” toward other people or opposition to Australian military interventions.

A spokeswoman for Attorney-General Philip Ruddock has already moved to capitalise on the raids by foreshadowing proscription of the LTTE. While no decision had been taken, “we continue to rely on ongoing advice from agencies on these issues”.

The raids provide another warning of how the “war on terror” can and will be increasingly exploited for political purposes, not only in Australia but around the world. Governments from Australia to Britain, Sri Lanka to the US now have a proven record of using unsubstantiated and inflammatory accusations of “terrorism” and “weapons of mass destruction” to justify the prosecution of war and the establishment of police-state measures.



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