

Australia: Extraordinary security operation shuts down central Sydney for APEC summit

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A massive military and police mobilisation accompanying the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit of 21 world leaders, who began arriving in Sydney yesterday, underscores the extent to which the Australian government has torn up basic democratic rights under the banner of the “war on terror”. The unprecedented security operation is specifically directed against scheduled protests to be held against the Iraq war and the visit of US President George Bush.

Bush—who along with Australian Prime Minister John Howard, is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and the destruction of Iraqi society—is the most prominent world leader to attend the summit. Others include Russian President Vladimir Putin, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and Chinese President Hu Jintao. Formed in 1989, APEC is an economic forum for Pacific Rim countries primarily established to discuss trade and investment issues.

Parts of central Sydney now resemble a city under military occupation, with a steel and concrete fence, five kilometres long and 2.8 metre high, encircling the environs of Circular Quay and the Opera House, a popular harbourside tourist precinct. Only those with the required accreditation, involving clearances from the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), are permitted inside this fortified area.

In addition, parts of Sydney have been declared “APEC security areas”. Under the APEC Meeting (Police Powers) Bill, drafted by the NSW state Labor government, police have extraordinary powers within these areas, including the authority to stop and search any individual or vehicle without warrant. Included are four central Sydney hotels and their immediate surrounds, the city’s airport, parts of Kirribilli and the beach-side suburb of Bondi, and the Royal Australian Air Force base in northwest Sydney. Anyone arrested will be denied the presumption of bail and detained for the duration of the APEC summit. Those convicted of entering a restricted area without authorisation will face up to two years’ jail.

That sections of Australia’s largest city and commercial centre have been shut down and its four million residents barred from many public areas demonstrates the gulf that separates world leaders from ordinary people. Meetings of leaders of the major powers are now invariably accompanied by huge military-police operations, with Sydney following similar exercises in recent years in Seattle, Genoa, and Rostock.

The scale of the Sydney security operation bears no relationship to any actual danger posed to the personal security of the meeting’s participants.

Australian authorities have admitted they have no information of any terrorist attack. The official terror alert level has not been altered. The Howard government, along with its Labor counterpart in NSW,

has nevertheless seized upon the APEC summit as an opportunity to introduce a raft of police-state laws and condition people to the domestic use of the military.

An estimated 1,500 military personnel, including elite SAS troops, have been mobilised along with 3,000 New South Wales police. Changes made to the Defence Act last year by the Howard government and backed by the Labor Party give the Australian Defence Force wide-ranging domestic powers, including the authority to interrogate civilians, seize documents, and use lethal force. Troops can be called onto the streets on the orders of the prime minister, who is not obliged to notify either the public or the Australian parliament.

In the weeks leading up to the summit, civilian areas have witnessed increasing levels of military activity. Security drills have involved Blackhawk helicopters flying over Sydney’s central business district and various suburbs, with troops firing practice ammunition and searching buildings. Naval craft have patrolled Sydney harbour and FA-18 fighter aircraft flown over the city. The warplanes have instructions to shoot down unauthorised aircraft if deemed necessary.

In addition, foreign leaders are bringing their own security details. Bush is being protected by a small army of 250 secret service agents, three 747 jets, two or three air transport jets, two helicopters, and a fleet of armoured cars and vans. Accompanying the president are 50 White House aides, 150 national security advisors and around 200 other US officials.

To justify the police-military measures before an increasingly hostile and disgusted population, a months-long campaign has been carried out by the media and political establishment, vilifying and threatening those planning to take part in anti-APEC protests.

In an irrational outburst last week, Howard attacked “violent” demonstrators—more than a week before the protests were scheduled to take place: “The inconvenience people will suffer next week is not the fault of the federal government, it’s not the fault of the New South Wales government, it’s not the fault of George Bush or the New South Wales police, it’s the fault of the violent demonstrators,” he declared on August 27.

Likewise, on August 21, NSW Premier Morris Iemma condemned “feral groups” for organising a school student walk-out and demonstration planned for September 5. Assistant police commissioner Dave Owens added that “we cannot guarantee their [school students’] safety” and “the same rules apply to them as anyone else”.

On August 22, the *Daily Telegraph* published a front-page story headlined “APEC protest mayhem plan”. The Murdoch-owned Sydney tabloid claimed to have accessed “secret security planning documents” and predicted a “week-long campaign of mayhem

involving every major protest group in Sydney will cause mass CBD disruption". The story was a shameless beat-up, based on nothing more than publicly available protest schedules issued by trade unions, human rights organisations, and ethnic groups.

The *Australian* published a bizarre front page article today headlined "Just who has the missing weapons?" that has all the characteristics of a story planted by government or intelligence officials. Insinuating that the planned protests could provide a staging ground for a terrorist attack, the article claimed that the APEC security measures were necessary to protect the US president from the threat posed by nine rocket launchers stolen from a military storage facility in 2002. "It is one of the reasons Australian and US security advisors are insistent that protestors will be at least 300m from the president at all times," the *Australian* claimed. "Theoretically, the launchers can fire from that distance but an amateur would generally be able to fire them only 125m."

Talkback radio "shock jock" Alan Jones has encouraged police to attack protestors. On August 23, Jones—who played a central role in inciting the anti-Muslim riots on Sydney's Cronulla Beach in 2005—backed the refusal of police to approve the planned route of the main demonstration scheduled for September 8. "Why should the protesters be given approval to march or assemble just because they want to?" he declared.

Jones then demanded that police employ a new high-powered water cannon. "If there's a \$600,000 water cannon which we've purchased, use it," he said. "If it can knock protesters off their feet, if they defy the law in numbers, use it... If there's a 12,000-litre tank with shatterproof glass and a push bar in the front that can clear barricades and other obstacles, use it."

Unveiling the water cannon, Premier Iemma admitted it could cause "serious injury" but boasted it was "a good weapon to have to restore order and control". Extra police vehicles and equipment have been assembled, including 31 state transit buses that have been converted into "mobile prisons", each capable of detaining 70 people. The NSW government has also created an additional 500 prison spaces in anticipation of mass arrests at the APEC demonstrations.

Laws purportedly designed to combat terrorism are being openly utilised to suppress political opposition and severely curtail the basic democratic right to free speech and assembly.

The state Labor government has passed legislation allowing police to draw up a secret list of "excluded persons" who are barred from entering the designated APEC "security areas". The only basis for their exclusion seems to be that they have participated in other protests. Under the Orwellian law, no appeal can be lodged, and police are not even required to inform those on the list.

Police apparently leaked to the media the names of 27 "excluded persons", along with their photographs taken at past demonstrations.

Protest organiser and University of Technology Sydney tutor Paddy Gibson told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that he had seen his photograph on the list but had not been contacted by police. "This order is totally unjustified and aimed at intimidating people against protesting," he said. "There is a real urgency to get out on the street in opposition to what the Howard government is doing in Iraq. There is no way I won't be at this demonstration. It's not that I don't care [about the legal consequences] but I think there's a political necessity."

While the media and government campaign against the planned demonstrations is intended to intimidate ordinary people and deter them from attending, one of its primary aims is to justify police

violence against protestors.

Over the past several years, police violence against protestors has been steadily escalating.

In November 2000, demonstrators were viciously attacked by police at the World Economic Forum held in Melbourne. Officers removed their name tags to avoid identification, and then pepper sprayed, punched, kicked, and struck people with their batons. One woman was run over by a police vehicle. Similar scenes occurred at last November's G20 meeting of international financial leaders to the World Economic Forum, also held in Melbourne.

In one of the worst incidents, Italian *carabinieri* shot and killed Carlo Giuliani, a 23-year-old protestor, at the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa. Evidence of police provocations emerged in the aftermath of the Genoa demonstration. And last June, similar provocations were revealed following the protests at the G8 summit in Rostock, Germany.

Just last month in Canada, police provocateurs infiltrated a protest in Montebello where Bush was meeting with other North American leaders. The three agents had dressed in black and covered their faces with masks, while one of them was carrying a large rock in his hand. When protest organisers identified the men as provocateurs, they quickly sought refuge behind a line of riot police. Canadian police later admitted the men were cops but claimed they were only monitoring the protest. However, video footage of the incident, which has been widely circulated on the Internet, indicates that the agents intended to provoke clashes. (See "Canada: Police agent-provocateurs unmasked at Montebello summit protests")

A similar provocation during the next week in Sydney is entirely possible—leading to serious injuries or even deaths. The Howard government is staring defeat in the face at federal elections due later this year and nothing would suit it more than an incident that "justifies" the APEC security measures, facilitates the deployment of the military onto the streets, and paves the way for a "national security" scare campaign.

Regardless of Howard's immediate calculations, the APEC security preparations reflect broader international processes. In country after country, including the United States itself, enormous political tensions are being generated by the deepening divide between rich and poor and the resort to militarism and war. Governments around the world are responding to mass antiwar sentiment and growing political opposition by abrogating fundamental democratic rights and developing new repressive measures. This is the context in which the Howard government, in tandem with the state Labor government, and with the full backing of the federal Labor Party, has mounted the current APEC operation.



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