

New Zealand: 17 arrests in nationwide “anti-terrorist” raids

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Seventeen people are currently under arrest, with all but two refused bail, following a series of coordinated police “anti-terror” raids around New Zealand. On October 15, arrests were made in dawn operations carried out in Whakatane, Ruatoki, Hamilton, Rotorua, Wellington and Auckland. Two days later, a house in Taupo was searched. The raids involved 300 police and the closing of airspace in the Bay of Plenty area covering the entire eastern-central region of the North Island.

The accused, most of whom requested interim name suppression, have been charged with firearms offences, including illegal possession of Molotov cocktails, rifles and ammunition. The police have sought court orders to gather the group together to face charges in Auckland for what could well be an orchestrated show trial. Some defendants have appealed to have hearings in their home areas.

The circumstances surrounding the raids follow a similar pattern to numerous “anti-terror” operations in Australia, Canada, the US and Britain; sensationalised media coverage, vague and unsubstantiated claims of threats to the public, the suppression of details, trampling on basic democratic rights, intrusive use of widespread surveillance techniques and the extensive mobilisation of security forces.

None of the reported “facts” in the New Zealand raids should be taken at face value. Distortions and outright fabrications as well as the use of agents provocateur have all surfaced in “terrorist” cases overseas. There is no reason to believe that similar methods would not be used in New Zealand.

The timing of the terror scare is very convenient for the Labour government. It is barely a month since the abrupt collapse of a previous high-profile “security risk” immigration case against Algerian asylum seeker, Ahmed Zaoui. The Security Intelligence Service (SIS) was forced to drop all official opposition to Zaoui remaining in the country after declaring for five years that he should be deported as a suspected terrorist.

More immediately, the raids took place the week that amendments to the Terrorism Suppression Act were brought before parliament for their second reading. The bill creates a new offence of “committing a terrorist act”, punishable by life imprisonment. The definition of such an act includes the vague charge of “inducing fear” in a civilian population. The bill also removes the High Court’s power to review the declaration of groups as “terrorist” and places it solely in the hands of the prime minister.

During the operation on October 15, the traditional homelands of the Tuhoe Maori tribe in the remote Uruwera Ranges were placed under siege as armed police and officers in camouflage gear swarmed into the area in convoys of marked and unmarked vehicles and a helicopter. In one incident, children in a school bus said they were frightened when the bus was pulled over and searched at an armed-police roadblock. Over 100 people were stopped and compulsorily photographed—a procedure that has no legal basis, according to one academic.

Police claim that between 20 and 40 people had been conducting and participating in bush training camps involving the use of firearms and other weapons. Police, who said they were tipped off by hunters, claimed to have secretly video-taped military-style training with live ammunition. Police made highly-charged claims that they expected to find machine guns and grenades during their raids and that some of the instructors had Army or police backgrounds and were experienced in handling weapons.

Police Commissioner Howard Broad told a press conference he had timed the operation “in the interests of public safety”. However, according to Broad, there was “no imminent threat”, but a “serious risk” existed that needed to be “mitigated”. Unsubstantiated rumours soon circulated in the media that Prime Minister Helen Clark might have been endangered.

The arrests are the culmination of a year-long operation by a specialist police anti-terror unit, which has accumulated hundreds of hours of recordings from bugged conversations, video surveillance and cell phone calls and texts, as well as records of internet traffic and online purchases. A high-level secret group working out of the prime minister’s office has been involved throughout the unprecedented procedures, which also involved the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS). Political leaders from the government and main opposition party received a briefing about the raids before they took place.

Had the police been intent on simply laying firearms charges they could have moved nearly 12 months ago, when the initial reports of the training camps were received, at which point they could have made arrests without resorting to the widespread use of surveillance and warrants. If a decision is now made to proceed under the anti-terror legislation and bail is denied, the accused could well be imprisoned for anything up to two years before any case comes to trial.

Campaigners from various Maori sovereignty, environmental and “peace” groups were targeted in the raids. One person named

following his arrest is Tame Iti, a prominent Maori activist. According to one lurid report in the *Dominion Post* newspaper, Iti was “preparing to declare an IRA-style war on New Zealand in a bid to establish his long-standing dream of an independent Tuhoe nation”. Another report alleged that several un-named groups were training together, each planning to “hit targets” related to their own interests and “coordinated to cause maximum chaos and stretching police resources across the country”.

The operation’s net was cast extremely wide. A number of targeted groups and individuals—not all Maori—have protested vehemently that they have never had any contact with or knowledge of firearms, let alone anything that can be remotely construed as “terrorist” activity. A house stormed by police in Wellington’s Te Aro student quarter is a well-known meeting place for young anarchist, environmental and antiwar activists. Another searched in Taupo is the home and business premises of a middle-aged couple involved in organising an organic food co-operative.

The storming of the Ureweras was particularly significant for members of the Tuhoe tribe, who staged a 1,000-strong protest in the regional centre of Whakatane to express outrage over the police actions. There is a powerful and lingering sense of injustice among the Tuhoe, stemming from the British colonial government’s confiscation of their lands in 1864. Crops and buildings were destroyed as part of a scorched-earth policy against the Maori resistance.

Many of those caught up in the raid noted with bitterness that police officers stationed their roadblocks on the “confiscation line”, the point from where the land had been confiscated in the 1860s. Despite the massive concentration of manpower and weaponry in this part of the operation, only two people were arrested around the town of Ruatoki, raising questions about why it was necessary to blockade and lock down the entire Maori community.

This is the first time that the so-called “counter terror” laws, passed by the Labour government in 2001 in the wake of the September 11 attacks, have been invoked.

Police obtained warrants under the Summary Proceedings Act to search for evidence of offences committed against both the Firearms Act and the Terrorism Suppression Act. At least one warrant specifically cited the terrorism legislation and included an extensive list of arms, gun parts, military clothing and other items, many apparently purchased through a popular internet trading site.

Police admitted that while people had been arrested under the Firearms Act, evidence was being accumulated to justify charges under the Terrorism Suppression Act, which requires approval from the attorney general. It was confirmed on October 29 that a file had been presented to the attorney general with a request that it be evaluated for proceedings under the Act.

The terrorism laws were rushed through parliament just six weeks after the 9/11 attacks. At that time, the Terrorism (Bombings and Financing) Bill had just been presented to parliament. The government rapidly replaced the bill and pushed through the far more draconian Terrorism Suppression Act, with minimal opportunity for public comment.

Under the Act, any person inside or outside New Zealand can be

designated a “terrorist” or “associated person” solely on the word of the Director of SIS, with no right of judicial review. Anyone who participates in, recruits members for or funds, directly or indirectly, any identified “terrorist” group can be imprisoned for up to 14 years.

The definition of a “terrorist act” is so broad that even the pro-Labour trade union bureaucracy had to point out that routine protests and union activities could be branded as “terrorism”. The government subsequently amended the Crimes Act to mandate prison terms of up to seven years for carrying out an act with the intention of causing “significant disruption to commercial interests or government interests”—potentially outlawing strikes.

Further underlining the New Zealand government’s accommodation with the US-led “war on terror”, it was announced two days after this month’s police raids that the SIS had signed a new information-sharing deal that will give it access to a US government “terrorist” database. The SIS has begun recruiting staff for a new section, which will use the information as a “first alert system” to prevent anyone listed from entering the country.

Leading Maori political figures have branded the raids as racially motivated. Maori Party co-leader and MP Pita Sharples described it as “negative history repeating itself” and said the police “storm trooper tactics” had “violated the trust that has been developing between Maori and Pakeha [European New Zealanders] and sets our race relations back a hundred years”.

There may have been an element of racism involved in the raids. But in targeting Maoris, the government is testing out, against one of the most oppressed layers of the working class, police-state measures that will inevitably be used against broader layers of working people as social tensions rise. With the full knowledge and consent of the Labour government, the police have now employed the “anti-terror” legislation and legitimised the use of extensive surveillance, police dragnets and other anti-democratic methods.

Over the past week, there has been a wave of opposition to the raids. Last weekend, marches and rallies were held in 13 New Zealand locations, while protests were also held in Ireland, Australia, the US and England. In Auckland, 1,000 people marched on Mount Eden prison, where some of the accused are detained. They chanted “stand up, fight back when human rights are under attack” and called for the terrorism laws to be scrapped.



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