

Australia's spies active in world's strategic hotspots

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Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) chief Nick Warner gave the first-ever public speech by a director-general of the 60-year-old overseas spy agency last week. It was a calculated move by the Labor government to politically promote ASIS, Australia's equivalent of the CIA. Warner said it was time to "raise public awareness" of ASIS's "unique contribution" to "our foreign policy and security."

Totally hidden from public view for decades after it was secretly established in 1952, ASIS is now known to be operating clandestine networks of operatives and local agents in some of the world's most sensitive geo-strategic locations. These include Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia.

Warner spoke of a "revitalised" ASIS reaching a "pivotal point in its development." He claimed that ASIS had to further "increase its operational capacity" because it confronted an operational sphere that was "more challenging, volatile and dangerous than at any time since the service's formation" 60 years ago.

ASIS specialises in "HUMINT"—human intelligence—mostly derived from spies "running agents." Since 2001, under the cover of the so-called "war on terror," the agency has already acquired new roles, conducting "active operations" and providing front-line intelligence support for Australian military units, particularly the SAS, in the US-led invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. It has received an unprecedented five-fold expansion of its budget—to about \$250 million a year.

Now, ASIS is being increasingly focussed on three fronts that provide a pretext for its agents to step up

their activities in far-flung and critical conflict zones. Most notably, these are in Central Asia and South East Asia, where the US and its allies are aggressively combating China's economic and strategic influence.

The first focus is countering so-called "people smuggling," that is, the detection and disruption of the legitimate efforts of refugees to reach Australia to apply for asylum. In 2009, the Labor government gave ASIS an extra \$21 million over two years to expand these operations. Warner declared that ASIS provided "unique enabling intelligence for exploitation" by the Australian Federal Police (AFP).

According to the *Australian*, ASIS has teams of officers running "anti-people smuggling" spy networks and "disruption" activities inside Pakistan and Indonesia, where its covert operations include placing tracking devices on departing refugee boats, a practice that former AFP chief Mick Keelty refused to confirm or deny in 2004. Other media reports, of stepped-up interceptions of asylum seeker boats by the Sri Lankan government, point to ASIS agents functioning in that country as well.

Stopping refugees from fleeing oppression under the Labor government's doctrine of "border protection" has become a convenient pretext for setting up ASIS networks across the Indo-Pacific region. This is in line with Obama administration's own "pivot" to the region to strengthen its military alliances and secure the capacity to cut off China's key trade routes in the event of any conflict.

Warner did not mention China by name, but emphasised that ASIS provided intelligence on "the

intentions of potential foreign adversaries.” China was identified as such a potential threat in the Labor government’s 2009 defence White Paper. Warner also stressed ASIS’s close partnerships with “our traditional allies—the US, Britain, Canada and New Zealand.” Their contributions remained of “critical importance, particularly that of our major ally, the United States.”

Another focus identified by Warner was “the risk of nuclear proliferation and the spread of weapons of mass destruction.” He reported that ASIS had been “tasked to interdict the flow of proliferation materials and to support UN sanctions.” No targets were named, but this role indicates ASIS involvement in US-led interventions against Iraq, Syria, Iran and North Korea. In each instance, Washington has provocatively used the issue of weapons of mass destruction to instigate regime-change operations and assert its hegemony over vital regions of the world.

Warner nominated hostile “cyber operations” as one of the most “rapidly evolving and potentially serious threats” assigned to ASIS. China has previously been accused of posing a threat to Australian security in this field too. This focus also gives ASIS, together with the military eavesdropping agency, the Defence Signals Directorate, and the domestic spy service, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), a major role in the vast expansion of Internet surveillance that the Labor government is currently demanding. (See: “Australian government proposes sweeping Internet surveillance”)

In an attempt to justify ASIS’s heightened activity, Warner claimed, without any substantiation, that Australia faced greater dangers of terrorism than ever before. His speech, however, referred to other calculations preoccupying ruling circles, including that of potential wars. He said “global competition for resources” and “competitive tensions across regions” would generate an increased demand for “HUMINT and other intelligence reporting.”

The ASIS chief also pointed to preparations to deal with social unrest as the global economic turmoil continued. He referred to the government’s intelligence review report last year, which spoke of the difficulties of predicting “major discontinuities and events,” such as the “Arab Spring”—the term used to describe the political upheavals that began last year in Tunisia and

Egypt. (See: “Australian intelligence agencies prepare for political upheaval”)

The Labor government’s build-up of the intelligence and security apparatus is in line with similar far-reaching measures being adopted by the US, Britain and other Western powers. Like its counterparts, Australia’s capitalist class and its political representatives are presiding over ever-greater social inequality, and committed to imposing a program of austerity and militarism that will provoke working class resistance.

When the Labor government selected Warner to head ASIS in 2009, he had a proven record in guarding the interests of Australian imperialism. From 2003 to 2004, he commanded the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), a full-scale colonial-style takeover of the small island state. Between 2006 and 2009, he was Secretary of the Department of Defence, the civilian head of the Australian military.

The ASIS chief’s public address represents another attempt by the Labor government to condition public opinion for a new period of militarism abroad and sweeping attacks on basic democratic and legal rights at home by the vastly-expanded security apparatus established since 2001.

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