

Contradictions mount in latest Australian terrorism scare

Mike Head
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One of the four men detained by police in Sydney last weekend for allegedly conspiring to bring down a passenger plane was released without charge on Tuesday night. His release—after 70 hours of detention and intensive interrogation—raises further doubts over claims by the security agencies, the media and the political establishment of a supposed “terrorist plot.”

Despite the police clearly having no evidence against the man, Abdul Merhi, he was held without trial for three days. He was also identified and vilified throughout the corporate media, and accused by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and other political leaders of being part of a “sophisticated” plot intended to kill hundreds of airline passengers.

Moustapha Kheir, the lawyer representing Merhi, said his client was considering legal action against the authorities. It was “unfathomable” that Merhi would be accused of association with terrorism. Kheir said he was worried his client’s identity had been divulged. “That’s caused a lot of damage to him,” Kheir said. “He’s had his life turned upside down.”

Moreover, no charges have been laid still against the three other men. They remain under interrogation by police, using draconian powers handed to them under the post-2001 anti-terror laws to hold people for at least eight days without charge. Police sources reportedly indicated to journalists they might ask a court to extend the detention beyond next Saturday.

Responding to growing public scepticism, New South Wales Police Commissioner Mick Fuller today said people would “understand” the police operation “more holistically,” if charges were laid. He thought that would happen “in the coming days, as this matter progresses.”

Meanwhile, airlines and airport authorities have scrambled to assure the public that there is no danger to

passengers, despite the alarmist claims made by the government and the imposition of security measures that have caused lengthy queues and delays around the country.

Just hours before Merhi’s release, Turnbull, in a radio interview, insisted it was a “fact” that “a joint counter-terrorism team—ASIO [Australian Security Intelligence Organisation], the Australian Federal Police and in this case New South Wales Police—were successful in disrupting a major terrorist plot to bring down an aeroplane.”

Apart from prejudicing any chance of a fair trial for the men if they are charged, Turnbull claimed their arrests proved the need for the far-reaching restructuring of the police and intelligence apparatus he announced the previous week. He pointed to the recent creation of a Home Affairs super-ministry to centralise the government’s control over ASIO, the Federal Police and the Border Force, and the readiness of the military to be deployed domestically to assist in “keeping Australians safe.”

Turnbull insisted the “major terrorist plot” was “a reminder” that “we have to be relentless in ensuring that our fine intelligence and security services are working together, cooperating with agents in other countries as well, and of course with the Australian Defence Force.”

At a media doorstep event yesterday, after Merhi’s release, Turnbull refused to offer any explanation for that revealing development, claiming he had to “respect the integrity of the investigation process.” Nevertheless, he pointed to his close personal involvement in the police-intelligence operation.

“I am constantly in touch with this operation as I have been from the very outset actually, from last week, but I don’t have any more operational details I

can reveal to you at the moment,” Turnbull said. “There will be a lot more said if and when charges are laid.”

In making his comments, the prime minister knew he was assured of bipartisan backing by the Labor Party opposition.

Appearing on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Lateline” last night, shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus said he and other senior Labor politicians, including party leader Bill Shorten, had received a briefing on the case by “our senior national security officials.” The briefing confirmed “the high level of efficiency, competence and coordination that our national security agencies are bringing to bear in protecting Australians.”

In reality, the contradictions appearing in the case show the need to recall the long record of the police and intelligence agencies, backed by successive governments, in triggering media scare campaigns with fabricated claims that later collapse. Time and again, no evidence has been produced in court to justify allegations of plots to attack ASIO offices, blow up Gold Coast residential towers, bomb football finals, carry out beheadings and storm army barracks.

Instead, people have been convicted of terrorist-related “plans” or “conspiracies,” often after being set up by undercover police agents, on the basis of post-2001 laws that require no evidence of any specific target, time or method of attack, just a vague intention to prepare or assist “a” possible terrorist act. ASIO also has a history, spanning decades, of political harassment, dirty tricks and frame-ups, particularly directed against socialists and anti-war activists.

The WSWS has no means of yet judging whether the latest “plot” existed, but there is no doubt that the allegations are being used, as with every previous “terrorist” case over the past 15 years, as a pretext for the further erosion of basic legal and democratic rights.

Already, laws introduced since 2002 have overturned the fundamental precepts of innocent until proven guilty and habeas corpus (no detention without trial) established through centuries of struggle against absolutist regimes.

The “investigation” detention power used against the four men this week permits the police to extend their interrogation beyond a week by excluding “dead time,” such as when a detainee is sleeping, talking to their

lawyer or eating. In a recent case, a person was held for a total of 201 hours.

This is just one of five types of detention without trial now available to the police and intelligence network. ASIO, for instance, has the power to secretly detain and interrogate people for a week, without the detainee being able to alert loved ones and the media they have been seized. ASIO is currently pushing for that power to be extended to teenagers as young as 14.

As well as creating the scaffolding for a police-state, the “war on terrorism” has been used to justify escalating Australian military involvement in US-led invasions and wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, all seeking to establish Washington’s hegemony over the resource-rich and strategic Middle East.

This year, that “war” has been extended to the Philippines, where Australian surveillance aircraft are already supporting Philippine and US military operations, and calls have been made for Australian Special Forces to join them.



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