

Bali bombings anniversary used to promote war agenda

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Last week marked the 20th anniversary of the October 12, 2002 bomb blasts that tore apart two popular nightclubs on the Indonesian island of Bali, indiscriminately killing 202 innocent people.

Most of the victims of the terrorist atrocity were young tourists from around the world, including 88 Australians, along with 38 Indonesians, mostly workers at the Sari nightclub or taxi drivers waiting outside. Many more people were maimed and disfigured for life.

For several days last week, commemorations of the anniversary received wall-to-wall media coverage across Australia, featuring some gruesome replays of the carnage. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese gave multiple breakfast television and radio interviews and spoke at one of the memorial events, taking every opportunity to identify himself with the tragic losses of lives.

While conducted in the name of honouring the victims, the commemorations have been politically exploited by the Labor government and the corporate media for two purposes. One is to continue covering up the underlying causes of the bombings, conducted by Islamic extremists, and the role of then Liberal-National government, which publicly assured Australians it was safe to visit Bali despite intelligence warnings of a likely attack by Al Qaeda-linked terrorists.

The other is to promote today's war agenda, which has shifted from the post-2001 "war on terrorism" to the mounting US-led war provocations against Russia and China, with the Australian government again on the frontline of Washington's military operations and preparations. Like the "war on terrorism," this war drive will be accompanied by further anti-democratic measures, above all directed against opposition to the escalating militarism and danger of nuclear war.

Albanese set the tone by describing the bombings as a "wake up call" for Australia. He told the "Today" show: "They made us much more conscious about the fact that we need to be vigilant against those who would cause us harm and attack our way of life."

Many of the media interviews then turned directly to his phone call the previous night with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky about sending Australian troops to train Ukrainian military personnel for the US-NATO war against

Russia, in which Australia is already the largest non-NATO weapons contributor.

The WSWWS has a long record of writing on the Bali bombings, exposing the unanswered questions about them, and the opposition of some of the victims' families to the political exploitation of the tragedy.

Right up to the day of the bombings, the government of Prime Minister John Howard told ordinary Australians it was safe to holiday in Bali, despite receiving specific warnings from US intelligence agencies, as well as its own Office of National Assessments, about likely attacks on the island in response to the US-led, and Australian-joined, invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001.

While tourists were kept in the dark, intelligence agencies gave the opposite advice to military personnel, diplomats and Qantas, the main airline profiting from travel to Bali. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) had advised Qantas on July 3, 2002 that: "Given the JI [Jemaah Islamiyah] presence in Indonesia, neither Jakarta nor Bali could be considered exempt from attack."

Like those who conducted the September 11, 2001 Al Qaeda terrorist attacks on the US, the Jemaah Islamiyah perpetrators of the Bali bombings were Islamic fundamentalists known to the US and allied intelligence agencies. They were initially spawned by the US-sponsored "jihad" to overthrow the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan during the 1980s, and then, after the US turned against them, inflamed by the US invasion of Afghanistan.

Australia was targeted, via Bali, because it was one of the few countries to commit combat troops to the US occupation of Afghanistan. Backed by the Labor Party, Howard had become one of the most vocal supporters of the Bush administration's militarism, calculating it would enable Australian imperialism to carry out its own neo-colonial interventions closer to home.

Howard and his ministers immediately seized on the Bali bombings, declaring that they were Australia's own "September 11," in order to carry through far-reaching shifts in both domestic and foreign policy.

The Bali blasts were presented as new proof of an "arc of instability" from South East Asia to Fiji, requiring Australian military and political intervention throughout the region.

Above all, Howard invoked the bombings to justify sending Australian troops to join the Bush administration's criminal and illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. In the face of the largest anti-war protests in Australian history, he cynically exploited the tragedy to bolster Washington's case for what was a naked US grab for resources and power in the Middle East and the wider Eurasian landmass.

The Bali bombing propaganda fed into the global campaign of lies to demonise the Iraqi regime, with false claims that it supported Al Qaeda terrorists and possessed "weapons of mass destruction (WMD)."

Domestically, the political establishment created a climate of anti-Muslim prejudice, launching sweeping attacks on democratic rights under the banner of fighting terrorism. Within two weeks of the Bali bombing, heavily-armed ASIO officers and the Australian Federal Police carried out violent dawn raids on the homes of Islamic working-class families.

At the same time, the government stepped up its agitation for the passage of new laws giving ASIO unprecedented powers to detain and interrogate people without trial, simply on the suspicion that they may have information about terrorism. Ultimately, the anti-democratic legislation was passed, with the support of the Labor opposition, eight months later.

Just months before the bombings, the Howard government, with bipartisan support from the Labor Party opposition, already had pushed through draconian legislation that defined terrorism and treason so broadly it could be interpreted to include forms of political protest and industrial action.

Over the past 20 years, more than 120 pieces of such "counter-terrorism" laws have been imposed, with bipartisan support, repeatedly extending and expanding the terrorism-related criminal offences and the surveillance powers of the intelligence and police apparatus.

Among the family members who spoke out in protest following the bombings was Adelaide magistrate Brian Deegan, whose son Josh, 22, died in Bali. Deegan said his son was part of the "collateral damage" of the Howard government's military campaigns in East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq. The government had been "reckless with young Australians' lives" and the "loop of negligence" included the government, airlines and travel agents.

Today, behind all the official pretensions of sympathy, the victims and their families are again being exploited to drum up nationalist sentiment and support for frontline Australian participation in US-instigated wars for hegemony over Eurasia, this time directly against Russia and China.

Significantly, some of the most direct connections were drawn by the government-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation. On its Radio National, for example, Patricia Karvelas put the following question to Albanese:

"The nature of national security threats have also changed over the past 20 years. As we reflect on the lives lost, we also reflect on terror and the way we deal with these issues. Has the

threat of terrorists like Jemaah Islamiyah or Al Qaeda been superseded by threats from rogue states and even the emergence of right-wing terrorism?"

The prime minister answered: "Well, what has occurred over a period of time is that the nature of the threat has changed, but the need to be diligent has not."

As soon as it took office in May, like the Liberal-National government before it, Albanese's Labor government underscored its commitment to accelerating Australian imperialism's military build-up and integration into the decade-long US preparations for war against China, regardless of the danger of a catastrophic World War III.

Albanese flew straight to Tokyo to a leaders' summit of the anti-China Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with the US, India and Japan and reiterated his government's support for the 2021 AUKUS military pact with the US and the UK, including the multibillion-dollar acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines and hypersonic missiles for use against China.

Nevertheless, the escalating anti-Russia and anti-China barrages demonising them, are just as false and hysterical as the WMD and other discredited lies of the "war on terrorism." It is the US and its allies that are recklessly goading Russia and China into military conflicts in order to assert US global hegemony.

Moreover, the working class in Australia, as worldwide, is increasingly entering into struggles against the assault on living conditions, which is being exacerbated by the impact of the Ukraine war and the growing pouring of money into war operations.

The true lessons of the Bali bombings, and its coverup, must be drawn. This working-class resistance must be developed into a politically conscious, international movement of the working class against war and the capitalist profit system itself, the source of imperialist militarism and repression.



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