

Australian Raids and American Assassinations

by Michael Billington

The nations of Southeast Asia have been put on notice by the U.S. war party and its “deputy sheriff” in Asia, Australia and her Prime Minister, John Howard, that their citizens are henceforth subject to police-state measures while in U.S. or Commonwealth territory, and to American extra-judicial assassinations in their own homelands, if the United States deems them to be associated with terrorists.

The Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) has launched a campaign of terror against Indonesians (and others) living in Australia. A series of pre-dawn raids began Oct. 27, with break-ins into about 30 homes of Indonesians (including several who were Australian citizens) across the country, with agents wielding automatic weapons, ordering even the children to the ground during hours of searches, and confiscating computers and other goods.

The target list included anyone who had attended lectures given by the Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Ba’asyir during his 11 visits to Australia in the 1990s. Ba’asyir is accused of being the spiritual leader of the Jemaah Islamiah, a vaguely described and loosely connected network of accused terrorists in Southeast Asia. His visits to Australia came during his self-imposed exile from Suharto’s Indonesia during the 1990s, which he spent in Malaysia. ASIO chief Dennis Richardson claims there is more evidence against the targets of the raids than mere attendance at the legal and public meetings Ba’asyir addressed in Australia—but Richardson has provided none.

The Indonesian government has urged Indonesians to leave Australia, and told travellers to avoid the country. Jakarta also protested to the Australian government for failing to notify them, as required by international law, of investigations against their citizens. The head of the 40-million-strong Nahdlatul Ulama, Hasyim Muzadi, accused Australia of confusing terrorism with Islam. Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri told Australia: “Let’s not go overboard. We Indonesians always treat foreigners proportionally.” Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, responding to “travel warnings” from Australia against all of Southeast Asia, declared that “Australia is particularly unsafe for Muslims.”

Many Australians are also protesting this disregard for law and fundamental civil rights. Craig Emerson, the opposition Labour Party’s shadow Trade Minister, accused Prime Minister Howard of “putting your prejudices ahead of Australia’s national interest,” adding: “He just doesn’t like Asians.”

The Age reported that Howard’s predecessor as Prime Minister, Paul Keating, had been accused by “Clash of Civilizations” author Samuel Huntington of being too friendly towards Asians, of wanting Australia to “defect from the West, to redefine itself as an Asian country” in a “civilizational shift,” but that Howard had pulled the country back from the brink, linking arms again with its Anglo-Saxon brothers against Asia.

Slandorous attacks on President Megawati have filled the Australian press. The prestigious *Australian Financial Review* carried an article Nov. 8 by Geoffrey Barker, reporting that “Senior politicians and officials now regard Indonesian President Megawati Soekarnoputri as incompetent and divorced from reality.” Barker said these officials had told him “the ongoing deterioration [in relations] will become irreversible if Indonesia does not tone down its attacks on Australian travel advisories and the recent raids on Muslim households.” When Indonesia’s chargé d’affaires in Australia, Imron Cotan, called the raids unnecessary and a threat to cooperation, an official told Barker: “It was an outrage, the sort of thing you would expect from Saddam Hussein or the Taliban, not from any self-respecting government.” He quoted another unnamed official saying of Megawati: “This was someone with no sense of the occasion, no capacity to show political leadership . . . where the hell is this turkey coming from?” Such venom confirms that the threat from Defense Minister Robert Hill to send troops into Indonesia to “fight terrorism,” must be taken seriously.

Assassinations

At the same time, the Nov. 3 assassination of six people in Yemen by a missile fired from a U.S. Predator drone, is seen as a harbinger of similar pre-emptive, unilateral attacks in Asia. Warhawk Paul Wolfowitz, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense, described the assassination as “a very successful tactical operation,” and said: “So we just got to keep the pressure on everywhere we are able to. . . .” He added, ominously, “I still think there are far too many Indonesians who haven’t quite heard the call yet. I think they should stop being in denial, and stop pretending there’s no terrorist problem, and stop pretending that this is just something the Americans invented, and get on with developing good, solid democratic methods [!] for dealing with these people.”

In a conference on terrorism in Manila Nov. 9, Francis Taylor, U.S. State Department coordinator for counter-terrorism, asked if such assassination measures were being contemplated for use in Asia, responded that the assassination was “both legal and appropriate. . . . We will use whatever is necessary and legal to attack this terrorist threat. . . . The option is on the table” for use in Southeast Asia.

Regional responses were immediate, rejecting such imperial crimes. Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said Taylor’s remarks were discouraging: “My fear is that when you do this, it is like Israel committing state terrorism.”