



IDSS COMMENTARIES (45/2004)

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Jakarta Bombing 2004: Why Target Australia?

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The latest terrorist attack in Jakarta, on 9 September, hit the Australian embassy. Soon after the blast, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer was quoted saying that it was “directed at Australia”. The first Australian news reports were quick to point out that there were no Australian casualties. Nine Indonesians were killed. It was later found that a five-year-old girl with Australian citizenship was among the 158 injured.

Indonesian and Australian authorities blamed the regional terrorist network, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which claimed responsibility in a statement posted on an Islamist website. JI said it chose Australia as it “didn’t respond positively” to messages “regarding its participation in the war against our brothers in Iraq”, and was therefore to be “punished”. JI also called on Canberra to withdraw forces from Iraq, threatening more attacks. Prime Minister John Howard rejected the warning and reiterated Australia’s commitment to Iraq.

Are Australians being specifically targeted in Indonesia? Why?

Target Australia

Canberra has constantly reminded its citizens, at home and abroad, not to take security for granted. To date, no major attack has been carried out in Australia, and the most significant Australian casualties from a terrorist attack have been the 88 killed in the Bali nightclub bombings. But Australia has been on the terrorists’ radar screen for some time.

In December 2001, Singaporean authorities foiled a JI plot to bomb western interests, and targets included the Australian High Commission. Similarly, in June 2003, Thai police uncovered another JI plot to attack the Australian embassy in Bangkok, along with the U.S. and British missions. In March this year, a lone attacker threw a small explosive device made of “firecracker material” at the High Commission in Kuala Lumpur.

This last attack caused insignificant damage, and speculations of it being a terrorist attack were dismissed. In Australia itself, deported Frenchman Willie Brigitte was apparently involved in plans with Pakistan-based terrorist group Lashkar-e-Toiba, to attack critical infrastructure in Sydney.

Why Australia?

One can fathom a number of reasons why Australia has, post-9/11, become a direct terrorist

target. Australia's White Paper on transnational terrorism discussed a 'clash of cultures', noting that it is a target because terrorists are "threatened" by its "example as a conspicuously successful modern society". But, as many experts and scholars have noted, it is more probable that terrorists target a country and its nationals for the government's policies.

Some analysts and opposition politicians suggest that Mr Howard's staunch support for the Bush administration and its 'war on terror' policies have made Australia a target. Canberra was amongst the first to respond to Washington's call for allies – first into Afghanistan in 2001, and then Iraq in 2003. This was noted by Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, who issued a statement in mid-November 2001 on the Afghanistan conflict, saying, "...what do Japan or Australia or Germany have to do with this war? They just support the infidels and the Crusaders." Other commentators have noted that Australia's involvement in the separation of East Timor from Indonesia, and Canberra's perceived anti-Muslim immigration policies have fuelled resentment against Australia.

The fact that the attack took place just a month before Australia goes to the polls, in which Mr Howard is seeking re-election, drew comparisons with the Madrid bombings affecting the outcome of Spain's elections, with significant implications on its domestic and foreign policies in March this year.

One explanation could be Australia's call in August for the extradition of the Bali bombers from Indonesia to Australia. Charges against an Indonesian, who admitted to involvement in the Bali blasts, were dropped following an Indonesian Constitutional Court ruling that anti-terrorism laws could not be applied retroactively. Mr Downer said that if the Bali bombers avoided justice in Indonesia, Australia might have to take its own action – extraditing the culprits to Australia to face charges. Indonesia later cautioned Canberra against diplomatic pressure on Jakarta, especially since it risked a backlash by Islamic fundamentalists in Indonesia.

Going Ahead

In its White Paper, Canberra recognised that the extremist interpretation of Islam is behind the terrorist threat today. But it noted, "the notion of 'root causes' is misleading", saying that the terrorists are "opportunistic in invoking popular concerns to rally people to their cause". Despite this, it commits itself to tackling the economic, social and political factors that give rise to extremism.

Australia is proactive in regional counter-terrorism efforts. Its strategy is to combat terrorism through operational-level cooperation, helping other countries develop and strengthen capabilities, and building political will among governments to respond to the long-term threat. It dedicated significant funding to help Indonesia build up its counter-terrorism capacity, for the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation in Semarang, inaugurated in July this year.

However, Australia might need to re-examine its policies, and see that 'root causes' play a real role in the terrorism equation. Beyond operational measures and sheer power, it is also important to be sensitive to the issues of the day, and the contexts.

In dealing with an unconventional threat such as terrorism, it is important not to aggravate existing tensions or animosities. Indeed, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Muslim organization, called on countries that are targets to exercise "introspection", with regards to

their global policies.

Policymakers have already acknowledged that terrorism today is an ideological threat. Against this, security measures and force have limited effectiveness. Going towards a comprehensive approach, utilising one's 'soft power' – attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals – might be appropriate. Already, several authorities have advocated winning 'hearts and minds', and veterans from the security forces recall that such a campaign was used successfully against the communist insurgency in this region.

Perhaps it is time for a change in mindset and policy, oriented towards engaging the populace and therein drying up support for the terrorists. JI continues to be a threat in the region, and military might has shown to have limited, short-term results. Since the attack, Australia is now allowed to build a high bomb-proof wall around its embassy compound in Jakarta. But will it be enough?

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