

# Unprecedented military security for Commonwealth meeting in Australia

By Mike Head  
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On the pretext of guarding against terrorism in the wake of the September 11 attacks in the United States, the Australian government, aided by its Queensland state counterpart, has turned this week's British Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) at Coolum on Queensland's Sunshine Coast into an armed encampment.

Reporters have dubbed the event "Fortress Coolum". Some 2,400 military personnel are on the ground and in the air. Police cars patrol every intersection leading up to the resort, where government leaders and officials are secluded in two hotels, entirely sealed off from the public. Even hotel security guards are equipped with night vision gear.

Alongside the army, Special Forces and air force units, about 4,000 state and federal police have been deployed, as well as officers from all the civilian and military intelligence agencies, including ASIO and the Protective Security Coordination Centre. Altogether, the security detachments outnumber by more than six to one the 1,000 or so official delegates and bureaucrats.

Security fencing has been erected around the Coolum resort and all unauthorised people have been barred. According to CHOGM spokesman Andrew Reynolds, the complex has been "locked down" to provide "a full security bubble".

The operation exceeds anything previously undertaken in Australia. About 4,000 troops and 6,000 police and private security guards were on hand during the much larger Sydney Olympics in 2000—the only precedent for this week's show of force—but the CHOGM mobilisation is more visible and intensive and marks the first use of the air force.

As Defence Minister Robert Hill informed a media briefing before the event, the CHOGM military force

has three components. The first is a contingent of soldiers performing what is described as basic security functions, such as patrolling airports, searching for bombs and guarding the perimeters of key premises. Troops have been stopping and searching cars, sweeping buildings for bombs and even confronting startled beach-goers.

Secondly, an undisclosed number of SAS and other Special Forces units are engaged in "counter-terrorism" operations and exercises. In the lead up to CHOGM, their training exercises included night drops from Blackhawk helicopters.

The third, officially labelled "air defence," has never been utilised in civilian areas before. Air Force FA18 fighters, armed with air-to-air missiles, are flying overhead constantly, with orders to shoot down aircraft that stray into a 25-nautical mile radius "danger zone" around the CHOGM venue.

Hill described the military effort, costing more than \$9 million, as a "security blanket that is extraordinary in Australian terms". But, he claimed, "it just reflects the changed world we live in". Hill admitted that no particular threat to CHOGM had been detected, yet declared: "Obviously in the post-September 11 environment, there's a greater role for the defence forces than previously because they have capabilities and particular skills that the civil authorities don't have."

Prime Minister John Howard's government has sent in the armed forces without invoking the military call-out legislation that it pushed through parliament with the backing of the opposition Labor Party in 2000, just before the Olympics. That legislation permits the federal government to mobilise the armed forces to deal with "domestic violence," with or without the agreement of a state government.

The legislation reverses the long-standing tradition, based on public aversion to the use of troops against civilians, that the military not be deployed for domestic security purposes. The government has not attempted, however, to justify its CHOGM operation by declaring a state of “domestic violence”. Instead, it has relied upon even more vague powers under the *Crime (Internationally Protected Persons) Act 1976* to use the defence forces to protect foreign dignitaries.

Premier Peter Beattie’s state Labor government in Queensland has eagerly seized upon the occasion to provide its police force with experience in using high-level security powers.

“CHOGM security is the largest operation of its type undertaken by the Queensland Police Service in its 137-year history,” Beattie boasts on his CHOGM web site. Police Commissioner Bob Atkinson has been equally enthusiastic, extolling the “many positive benefits” for the Queensland Police Service. “CHOGM is an important event for Queensland and police personnel will benefit significantly from participating in such a major international event,” he stated. “The Service has improved communication and developed open consultation with issue motivated groups and is now better positioned to effectively and safely manage protest activity.”

Howard and Beattie have justified the extraordinary police-military operation on the basis that CHOGM constitutes a major meeting of world leaders. “The risk assessment is not that there’s any particular threat but CHOGM is the largest meeting of world leaders in Australia for a long time,” Defence Minister Hill declared. “It includes world leaders that have played a significant role in the war against terrorism and therefore we’ve decided to deploy that extra security.”

But CHOGM hardly fits this rather grandiose description. With the possible exception of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, none of the representatives of the 52 countries present could be classified as “world leaders”. At least 10 heads of government have stayed away, either due to internal political crises or because they regard CHOGM as a waste of time. Notable absentees include Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe and Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamed Mahathir.

The meeting is of such little moment that few

demonstrators have bothered to turn out. Fewer than 1,000 people have participated in peaceful protests, stripping the police of the usual pretext for a huge deployment.

In fact the mobilisation is part of the government’s agenda of strengthening the repressive apparatus of the state—including boosting police powers and developing greater police-military cooperation.

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