

Massive security blanket for Cheney's Australian visit

By Mike Head
23 February 2007

Extraordinary levels of security surround the four-day visit to Australia by the United States Vice President Dick Cheney, who arrived in Sydney last night. The official purpose of the trip is to “thank Australia” for the Howard government’s participation in the so-called “war on terror,” particularly the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, hundreds of police and other armed personnel have been mobilised to prevent ordinary people getting anywhere near the vice president.

The New South Wales state Labor government has been working closely with the federal authorities to try to prevent any expression of the popular opposition to the Bush administration’s war crimes. More than 1,200 state police—almost a tenth of the entire NSW force—have been deployed at an estimated cost of \$2 million to protect Cheney and suppress demonstrations against his visit. That number does not include the special forces officers of the State Protection Group, Counter Terrorism Command, Dog Unit and Bomb Unit.

Several blocks around Cheney’s hotel are being shut for the four days, and city streets are being closed whenever Cheney’s convoy passes through, causing traffic chaos. Police and traffic authorities have urged motorists to stay out of the Sydney CBD, warning that “significant delays” will be caused by Cheney’s itinerary, which is being kept a tight secret.

For three days and nights before Cheney arrived, army Black Hawk helicopters buzzed the Sydney CBD, ostensibly for counter-terrorism training. Several residents contacted newspapers to complain of unbearable noise. One reader told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “We are ... being buzzed by huge noisy helicopters flying probably only about 20 storeys up. [Five] times in an hour—we can’t hear TV, we can’t talk on the phone.”

Last night, the airspace over Sydney was closed for US Air Force Two to land, and sections of the airport were virtually “locked down”. No members of the public were

permitted to enter the vicinity. Dozens of police, security officers and snipers were on the tarmac, as well as inside and outside the airport. A grey Air Force plane arrived first, carrying Cheney’s cavalcade of bulletproof black limousines and an armoured van, while at least three state police helicopters hovered above.

After perfunctory greetings by a handful of politicians, Cheney was swiftly taken away in his armour-plated limousine. As his 32-vehicle convoy—1.5 kilometres long—swept through the city to the Shangri-la Hotel on Sydney Harbour, traffic lights were turned red for all other vehicles, causing major disruptions.

This is the largest security operation in Australia since parts of Canberra, the capital, were shut down for US President George Bush’s one-day visit in October 2003. On that occasion, military planes and helicopters hovered overhead, the army’s elite SAS units were on standby and Bush’s secret service personnel were given unprecedented permission to carry weapons in the parliamentary precinct.

On the eve of Cheney’s arrival, the media reported that his security detachment had also been secretly granted special permission to carry guns. According to one Murdoch media report, there had been a threat to cancel the stay unless the NSW Labor government acceded to the federal government’s request to change the state’s Firearms Regulations to permit the security detail to carry sidearms.

NSW Police Minister John Watkins agreed to amend the regulations to allow possession and use of firearms “for personal protection or for the protection of another person” if the NSW Police Commissioner were satisfied that the circumstances warranted it. Defending the decision, Watkins said the federal government had “made very clear that this was critically important to the visit by the Vice President”.

Questioned by reporters, Premier Morris Iemma insisted

that state police would still be responsible for dealing with protesters. Obvious questions remained: Why then did the US secret servicemen need guns? What authority have they been given to use them?

NSW Police Deputy Commissioner Terry Collins said Cheney was “considered one of the highest risks we’ve had since September 11”. However, he conceded there was no credible intelligence of a likely terrorist threat. Once again, the “war on terror” is being used as a pretext to violate basic democratic rights, acclimatise public opinion to military and paramilitary operations, and impose unprecedented security measures.

Emma backed police commanders who declared that their officers would have a “pro-arrest” policy toward anti-Cheney demonstrators. “Everyone’s entitled to protest and to do so peacefully,” he told reporters. “But they are not going to cause inconvenience and disruption and take the law into their own hands.” Prime Minister John Howard also sought to intimidate protesters, declaring it would not be the fault of Cheney or the NSW police if protests created a disturbance in Sydney.

Last night, riot police, backed by mounted police, moved aggressively to block a relatively small protest by about 300 people outside Sydney Town Hall. Members of the crowd carried placards against Cheney, the war in Iraq, the planned increase of Australian troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the five-year imprisonment of Australian citizen David Hicks at Guantánamo Bay.

When demonstrators voted to march to the nearby US Consulate, police moved in to push them back into Town Hall Square. As scuffles broke out, eight people, including a teenage boy, were arrested during what police claimed was “unlawful protest action”. The seven adults were charged with long lists of offences, such as assaulting police, obstructing traffic, malicious damage, inciting crowd violence, resisting arrest and offensive conduct and language.

Ironically, given the traffic dislocations caused by Cheney’s movements, Deputy Commissioner Collins refused to allow the march on the grounds that it would cause unacceptable disruptions to people and traffic in the CBD. The protesters were eventually allowed to walk along the footpath to the Consulate.

Protest organisers said the police had blocked a legal march, saying they had given authorities the requisite seven days’ notice of intent to conduct a march. Under NSW legislation, that gives people the right to march on the street unless the police seek a Supreme Court injunction, which they did not. Instead, the police called

the organisers yesterday afternoon to demand that the march be cancelled and then issued a media release declaring it illegal.

This morning, walls of police prevented protesters from reaching the Shangri-la Hotel, where Cheney held a breakfast meeting with business and political figures, before making a foreign policy address. When about 100 demonstrators moved toward the hotel, behind a large banner saying, “Chain up Cheney—Free David Hicks,” police flooded the street, outnumbering the marchers three-to-one. Three people were arrested and an elderly lady trampled by police.

Security for Cheney is so tight that access by the Australian media—not known for challenging US war crimes—is being severely restricted and monitored. Reporters and photographers planning to cover events were told to register with the federal attorney-general for a National Visits Media Card, which is subject to a security clearance by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).

The NSW Premier’s Department instructed all media to register in advance for each event and to be in position in time to undergo police security and accreditation checks. Access to the majority of Cheney’s appearances is limited to a “registered media pool” of five photographers and TV camera crew. For a photo opportunity at Victoria Barracks this morning, where Cheney met Defence Minister Brendan Nelson and military personnel, photographers were ordered not to identify certain personnel, and warned that their cameras would be checked by the military before leaving the barracks.

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