



Countering Terrorism

The images of crumpled metal, crushed concrete and broken glass flashed across the world. Terrorists had targeted an international hotel chain where important meetings were taking place and detonated a bomb. Australians were killed in the blast.

While strikingly similar to 21st century terrorist attacks, this is a description of a bombing that happened 30 years ago in Australia. The attack on the Sydney Hilton Hotel in 1978 was the catalyst for the formation of the Australian Federal Police (AFP).

In the aftermath of the explosion the Australian government reviewed the country's existing law enforcement structure. In 1979, it agreed to establish a national police force. Within a year the AFP had several operations with national security implications under way, including an investigation into Australia's first political assassination.

In 1980, the Turkish Consul-General to Australia and his bodyguard were shot dead on a Sydney street. The same obscure terrorist organisation which claimed responsibility for the attack struck again in 1986 when it bombed the Turkish Consulate in Melbourne.

In 1982, a bomb was detonated near the Israeli Consulate in Sydney and, within hours, another blast had rocked a nearby Jewish community building.

The AFP was also investigating a number of attacks targeting the Family Law Courts. Justice David Opas was shot and killed in 1980 at his Sydney home. Four years later, Justice Ray Watson's wife Pearl was killed when a bomb targeting her husband exploded as she opened the door of their family home.

But by the end of the 1980s, incidents of politically-motivated violence had declined. The AFP's priorities changed to reflect a national focus on crimes like illegal drug importation.

That changed in 2001.

Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, the AFP has been involved in several successful counter terrorism operations.

The organisation's determination and expertise was put to the test in October 2002, when three bombs exploded in a busy tourist area on the resort island of Bali.

In all, 202 people were killed, including 88 Australians.

Within hours of the blasts, the AFP had offered support to Indonesian authorities and activated an Incident Coordination Centre in Canberra. Later that day, the

Indonesian National Police (INP) accepted the offer of assistance and one of the most significant operations in AFP history began.

At its height, 500 Australian police officers from a number of jurisdictions were involved in the investigation. Intelligence, crime scene, and disaster victim identification experts were sent to Bali. Investigators obtained more than 600 witness statements and debriefed more than 7000 visitors leaving the island.

The AFP's primary focus was to support the INP investigation. To this end, specialists in the areas of financial investigations and high-tech crime were deployed, along with forensic experts. AFP members were involved in setting up command post facilities for crime scene investigation, bomb-data analysis, post-blast analysis, fingerprint comparison, digital imaging and gathering other crucial forensic information. In all, nearly 3000 forensic exhibits and samples were collected.

To date, 71 people have been convicted on a range of offences related to the attack – from organising the bombing to harbouring wanted persons.

In Australia, the blasts had a profound effect, shattering for many the illusion that its citizens would not be targeted by extremist organisations.

Recognising this sentiment, the AFP established a Community Liaison Team in Melbourne to try to communicate more effectively with Victoria's diverse communities. In particular, the team aimed to build social resilience, and improve ties between police and the Muslim community. Through events like the AFP-sponsored Iftar dinners, which celebrate the breaking of the fast during the month of Ramadan, to school visits and football matches with high-profile AFL teams, the AFP has been able to improve relationships and build new bridges into the community. The success of these events has led the AFP to establish a second Community Liaison Team in Sydney.

Countering terrorism is a key priority for the AFP. Together with Australia's other law enforcement agencies, including state and territory police, it has conducted a number of successful investigations into domestic terrorist activities. In February this year, nine men were imprisoned after a joint investigation revealed they were planning to carry out an explosives attack at a major sporting event. Other investigations have led to the convictions of Faheem Lodhi for his role in planning an attack against Australia, and Belal Khazaal for making a document which encouraged others to engage in terrorist acts.

The AFP is also committed to working with its international law enforcement partners in a range of ways to combat the threat of terrorism. This includes participating in capacity development programs and relationship-building with other police agencies across South-East Asia.

The Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC) is a shining example of the way in which cooperative approaches to law enforcement can help to strengthen counter-terrorism capabilities. For the first time, participants from outside the South-East Asian region are attending courses on topics including Islamic law and politics, security risk management and disaster victim identification.

The AFP has also offered assistance to other countries affected by terrorist attacks. In 2005, terrorists again attacked the Indonesian island of Bali, and the AFP provided support and assistance to Indonesian police. The organisation was involved in the whole-of-government response to terrorist attacks in Mumbai during 2008, and offered support to Pakistani authorities following an incident in Lahore in March this year.

The organisation's approach towards protecting Australia's national interest is shaped by federal government direction. In recent years the way in which terrorist investigations and prosecutions are conducted has been reviewed through a number of inquiries. In response to these reviews, the AFP has adopted the recommendations relating to operational decision making processes, joint taskforce arrangements, information sharing with other agencies and training. The culmination of several key policy reviews this year will help the AFP to deliver a flexible and adaptable response to terrorist threats now and in the future.

Unfortunately, it seems that the threat of terrorism will be with Australia for some time yet. The AFP has built on its experience during events such as the Bali bombings and the 2004 attack against the Australian Embassy in Jakarta to ensure members are well prepared to deal with any future incidents.

In 1979 Australian politicians established a national police force that was dedicated to protecting the national interest. For the past 30 years the AFP has remained committed to this goal. AFP members today are as determined to investigate threats against Australia as they were when the organisation was formed in the aftermath of the Hilton Hotel bombing.