

'Terrorist training camps' raids find no smoking gun in bush

Ten years ago, the global 'war on terror' arrived in New Zealand. Whanganui historian Dr DANNY KEENAN reflects on a colossal over-reaction.



On October 15, 2007, private homes throughout New Zealand were raided by squads of police, for the most part in full riot gear, some carrying machine guns and handguns with knives strapped to their black garments.

The raids occurred at dawn, under cover of darkness.

They smashed doors, windows and furniture, arresting people, confiscating computers, cameras, electronics, files, and papers, searching for incriminating material to support charges under the Terrorism Suppression Act 2002.

One of those arrested was Vietnam veteran Tuhoe Lambert, who lived in South Auckland with his family. At 6am, the police arrived, ordering the whole family — including his 12 year old daughter, Patricia — into the street. The house was then ransacked.

Later that morning, the police occupied and locked down Ruātoki, a small Māori town near Whakatane on the western edge of the Urewera Valley.

Entire areas around Ruātoki and another nearby town Taneātua were cut off. People were prevented from leaving their homes; cars were stopped and occupants ordered out, sometimes at gunpoint. They were then searched and photographed.

According to some witnesses, a school bus full of children was boarded by armed police.

Reporters from a local paper, the *Whakatane Beacon*, soon arrived — the pictures they took went around the world.

According to Tuhoe kaumātua

Tamati Kruiger, a gross breach of civil rights occurred at Ruātoki that day — detaining people for hours without food or water, subjecting women to body searches, herding people into sheds while property searches were under way, and



ACCUSED:
Tame Iti

photographing onlookers near the roadblocks.

One young woman, Annie Rangihika, 17, was searched in public. When she was later approached by the *New Zealand Herald*, the Whakatane High School student

declined to comment, saying only that she would never forget what happened.

At least 17 people around New Zealand were arrested, though that did not include people taken from Ruatoki to Rotorua for questioning, before being released.

Mr Kruger claims police at Te Ngae station denied people legal representation, and were moved around police stations, confusing concerned family and friends.

At a press conference later that day, the police commissioner talked about the "terror raids", placing the language of the "war on terror" into New Zealand's public domain.

The raids had been necessary, he said, because certain individuals had been identified as posing a threat to the country's

peace and security. Eight key activists had attended terrorist training camps in Te Urewera, he alleged, learning all about civil instruction, assassination and naplam bombing.

Their ring leader was Tuhoe man Tame Iti, who stood accused of arranging and conducting these terrorist training camps. Iti's house was raided, while he was asleep. At gunpoint, Iti, who is not a young man, was made to lie face down on the floor.

Those 17 arrested later appeared in court charged with a range of alleged arms offences. Charges under the terrorism legislation would follow, it was said. But the police case, and their evidence, never made it to court.

On November 9, 2007, Solicitor General Dr David Collins reported that, having reviewed all of the intercepted evidence obtained by the police, he could not permit the material to be entered into court. He refused to allow charges to be laid under the Terrorism Suppression Act 2002.

This was because the 2002 act was "incoherent and unworkable", he said. The act could not be applied to those arrested in Ruātoki and other locations, it could only apply after alleged terrorism acts had occurred.

The Solicitor General's ruling constituted a dramatic setback for the government and the police. According to activist John Minto, the ruling proved that "no domestic terrorist cells existed".

Instead, he said, the police and politicians had done a great disservice to the country, exacerbated by their continuing

use of the word "terror" to justify their activities, imbuing the raids with a false moral purpose.

Whole communities had been traumatised and civil liberties threatened, he said.

Meantime, discontent among Māori had grown. On November 12, 2007, on the day the last of the 17 arrested were released on bail, a hikoi left Taneātua, heading for Wellington and 1500 people eventually made it to Parliament only to find the gates locked.

Labour ministers Parekura Horomia and Nania Mahuta spoke to the protesters, but they were loudly challenged and derided, their pleas for Māori to "wait and see" falling on deaf ears.

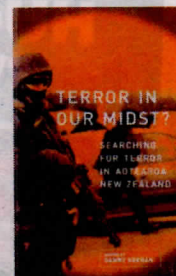
According to author Nicky Hager, the raids had constituted a "colossal over-reaction, a gigantic anti-terror operation where there were no terrorists".

The Government, armed with new legislation, resources and an emboldened police force, had instituted the raids, confident that terrorism and insurrection would be found and rooted out.

After five years of investigation and legal hearings, Iti and three others were found guilty of firearms charges.

He and Rangi Kemara received jail sentences.

Iti was released in February 2013, with prison staff describing him as a "role model prisoner".



■ Danny Keenan was editor of the book, *Terror in Our Midst? Searching for Terror in Aotearoa New Zealand*, (Huia Publishers, Wellington) which discussed the "terrorism raids" in historical and other contexts.