

Britain: government reports, leaks to media promote military build-up

Steve James
8 February 2000

The last two months have seen a series of leaks, reports, and parliamentary questions on the state of Britain's "war readiness".

Despite the sensitive nature of this information, no action has been taken to find the source of the leaks. It is likely that the leaks are part of an orchestrated campaign by sections of the military and the political establishment to justify substantial increases in military spending.

* In an unprecedented disclosure, a Ministry of Defence (MoD) spokesman announced that the Royal Navy is facing a £500 million budget deficit. A funding crisis meant that the Navy had been forced to cancel one exercise, withdraw 14 ships from another and even impose a 15-knot speed limit on its frigates to save fuel.

* A letter on the "parlous" state of the Defence Medical Services, from Admiral Sir John Brigstocke, was leaked to the BBC. The letter claimed that 1,500 sailors had been invalidated out of the Navy because proper treatment cannot be afforded and that the number of military doctors is less than half its required strength.

* Other reports, also "leaked" to the BBC, alleged British military operations against Serbia were weakened by lack of resources, which meant some troops having to buy their own camp beds or navigation equipment. The reports claim that, under these circumstances, a British land invasion would have ended in military disaster.

This information has come out at a point when the British military is genuinely over-stretched. Since 1997, 38 overseas missions have been carried out, including continuing operations against Iraq, in Kosovo and in East Timor. In contrast to the relative stability of the Cold War period, these operations are generally violent, rapidly prepared, and justified as humanitarian or peacekeeping missions. In addition, garrisons are maintained in such dispersed regions as the Malvinas (Falkland) islands, Gibraltar, Germany, Belize, Canada, Diego Garcia, as well as 15,000 troops that are still stationed in Northern

Ireland.

The Strategic Defence Review (SDR), inaugurated under the incoming Labour government in 1997 and delivered in 1998, called for a military re-orientation away from the set-piece land battles of Cold War strategic planning. Future wars would be fought with rapidly assembled and highly mobile forces that could be called upon to intervene in any area of the world. The SDR envisaged that the UK's forces should be able to fight two medium-sized wars at the same time, while engaging in a range of operations from peacekeeping to "defence diplomacy" and drug enforcement. These would generally be with NATO or other European forces.

To this end, the SDR called for new aircraft carriers, ferries, helicopter squadrons, and transport aircraft to be built. The management of the hitherto relatively separate army, navy and air force would be merged. The part-time Territorial Army would be strengthened. All this would be carried out within the rigorously enforced £22 billion total departmental budget for the Ministry of Defence—a one-third reduction since the end of the Cold War.

The fundamental changes the Labour government is pushing through can be further seen in a White Paper, issued in December 1999. This took forward the SDR and concretised the agreements made after the December conference of EU leaders at Helsinki, where Britain and France led calls for stronger European armed forces. The White Paper notes that in the light of the events in the Balkans, where European military weakness was exposed in comparison to its American allies, Europe should be able to assemble a force of between 50,000 and 60,000 troops "together with appropriate air and naval elements". Intended as a force able to "tackle the most demanding crisis-management tasks" and "militarily self-sustaining for at least a year" this was not to be regarded as a "European army."

Much of the White Paper, however, is devoted to the

recruitment, civilian support, and industrial buying necessary to sustain a modern army. For years, even during periods of high unemployment, the British military have been unable to either meet recruitment targets or retain trained staff—such is the popular hostility to army life. The White Paper includes a range of marginal improvements in conditions for military personnel—allowing longer telephone calls home when abroad, increased leave, better training, recognised qualifications. More women will be recruited, homosexuality will be tolerated, and even personnel sacked for being gay will be asked to rejoin. One percent of new recruits is intended to be via Labour's "New Deal" cheap labour programme.

Although not in the White Paper, the government also recently announced that the army was having "exploratory talks" with young offender's institutions with a mind to recruiting young convicts. Labour also previously announced that 1,400 military police would be released for combat duties and replaced by civilian MoD police.

One hundred thousand civilian civil servants are also employed by the military. An Action Plan is set out, essentially to introduce the same cost cutting and efficiency measures already standard practice in private industry and other state sectors.

Referring to the competition and duplication in the European weapons industry, the government noted that they were "working with the governments of France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden to develop a consistent approach to facilitate restructuring in Europe." The OCCAR project (*Organisation Conjointe de Cooperation en matiere d'Armaments*) was, they hoped, a means whereby "smart procurement"—modern project management techniques—could be introduced into the arms industry across Europe. By this means, the UK government hopes to push forward the integration of the European arms industry while defending the position of the British sector. The UK is significantly in advance of the rest of Europe both in military doctrine, and in the introduction of "smart procurement."

The budgetary targets and stresses arising out of re-organisation are the source of the immediate complaints emanating from the military top brass. While there are no apparent strategic differences between the government and the military chiefs, the military are highlighting that they need more money to carry out the Labour government's intentions. There are also disagreements over the relaxation of the restriction on gays.

Responding to the leaked warnings of a military funds

crisis, Labour's chairman of the Defence Select Committee, Bruce George MP, echoed calls for higher spending. "If the government wishes to achieve its objectives then defence spending will have to rise beyond the rather miserable level to which it has sunk over the last 15 years," he said.

Confronted with criticism from the Tories, Defence Minister Roger Spellar admitted the pressure on military budgets caused by the Kosovo and East Timor operations and noted, "we are in discussions with the Treasury on that." Robert Key, a member of the Conservative shadow defence team, told BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme: "This government has gone on cutting nearly £1 billion a year from the defence budget and this is really the problem—it is not turning round." The Liberal Democrat defence spokesman Menzies Campbell said that the leaks showed that "you cannot get defence on the cheap".

The \$35 billion (£22 billion) the UK already spends on defence is the third highest in the world, after the US (\$271 billion) and France. The armed forces directly employ 316,000 civilian and military personnel. This does not include the giant UK arms industry, which is the world's second largest supplier after the US and one of the UK's major employers, exporting around £5 billion worth of arms a year.

The present UK military budget amounts to only 7 percent of all state spending compared with 12 percent on education and 17 percent on health; 44 percent of the military budget goes on equipment. The aim of the leaked reports is to warn the Labour government that a shift in priorities is required if it is to meet its military ambitions.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact