

Australian government prepares military for Iraq war

Richard Phillips
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The Australian government has refused to deny a newspaper report that its defence forces are being readied for the US-led war against Iraq early next year. An article in the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* on December 18 revealed that Australian military commanders were planning for the assault in March. The *Telegraph* article followed the recent visit by US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage for detailed discussions on war preparations with government ministers and senior Labor Party officials.

Quoting senior military sources, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that Australia's commitment to the invasion of Iraq would include Special Air Services (SAS) troops, F/A-18 Hornet fighters, P3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft, a Boeing 707 air-to-air refueling plane and three warships, including an amphibious command vessel. Some 20 Australian military officers are already stationed at the US Gulf headquarters in Qatar, where they are preparing to oversee the arrival of the Australian military contingent.

SAS troops, including a contingent of 150 that recently returned from Afghanistan, have been in intensive training for operations in Iraq. Their role, according to the newspaper, will be to destroy Iraqi mobile Scud missile launchers. The Hornets could be used in bombing raids in conjunction with US planes from Qatar and Kuwait, while the amphibious ship would function as a support "warehouse" and command ship for Australian military forces.

The newspaper said that the Pentagon, which already has more than 60,000 troops in the region and 50,000 about to join them in January, was planning for an estimated 300,000 ground troops. If the UN endorsed the US-led attack, other countries would participate.

During the 1990-91 Gulf War, the Hawke Labor government sent three navy ships, a navy diving team,

the army's 16th Air Defence Regiment and a handful of military officers assigned to British and US ground operations, some air-photography analysts and four medical teams. Additional navy frigates were mobilised, after the initial conflict, in order to enforce UN sanctions. In contrast to the impending 2003 attack, no Australian airforce planes were mobilised and at no time were any more than a handful of ground troops involved.

While Howard claimed no formal decision had been made over the military commitment and "hoped it would not be necessary", neither he nor any other government minister rejected any aspect of the newspaper report.

Since September 11, 2001, the Howard government has consistently declared its support for the Bush administration's "war on terrorism". Just days after the terror attacks, Howard invoked the post-World War II ANZUS Treaty for the first time, committing Australia to militarily defend the United States. Last October, the government dispatched navy ships and SAS troops to Afghanistan and in the past months, has given the go-ahead for the US navy to use naval and live-fire shooting ranges in Western Australia.

Howard's reluctance to openly acknowledge his military commitment to the US is related to the growing domestic opposition to war against Iraq. According to a recent Morgan opinion poll, a majority of Australians (52 percent) disapprove of Australia being part of a US-led military force to overthrow Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Only 45 percent agree with Australian military action against Iraq, compared to 57 percent in December 1990 during the first Gulf War and 75 percent two months later in February 1991.

The government is also concerned about increasing unease on the part of ordinary people that participation

in the US-led operation will increase the likelihood of Australia becoming a target for terrorist attacks. These fears have intensified since the Bali bombings on October 12, in which 180 people, including 88 Australians, were killed.

Howard has tried to counter these sentiments by projecting the image of a concerned leader preoccupied with protecting his countrymen. In the wake of Armitage's visit, he told the media that his government "would not commit such a level of forces as to in any way weaken our capacity to deal with challenges or eventualities nearer to home". At the same time, the government, with the active support of the local media and the Labor Party, is seizing every opportunity to whip up fear and insecurity, and in this way attempt to drum up support for the "war on terrorism" and justify Australian involvement in a war against Iraq.

Accordingly, on December 19, Howard announced a major restructure and expansion of Australia's anti-terrorist forces, including the establishment of a new 310-strong army commando unit based in Sydney, the purchase of specialised troop-lift helicopters at the cost of \$450 million and a national operations control centre in Canberra. The restructure will entail army reservists being trained to serve alongside police in domestic anti-terrorist operations.

The new unit constitutes a 25 percent boost in Australian special forces units to 1,500 troops and will include additional weaponry and communications equipment. The centralised command centre in Canberra will also direct the SAS regiment in Perth on Australia's west coast and the Fourth RAR regiment, a commando force and elite terror response group at the Holdsworthy army base in Sydney.

On December 20, after Britain's Blair government announced it was putting 30,000 troops on standby for Iraq, the Australian military cancelled Christmas leave for the army's 5th Aviation Regiment. The regiment, which operates Black Hawk and Chinook helicopters, was heavily involved in Australia's military intervention in East Timor and conducts many operations in conjunction with the SAS. This decision, which received little publicity, together with the presence of 20 Australian military officers in Qatar, are further indications of the advanced state of the Howard government's military preparations.



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