

New Zealand commits troops and police to Solomon Islands occupation force

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The New Zealand Labour government is poised to send troops and armed police to the Solomon Islands as part of an Australian-led South Pacific “security” force. New Zealand Foreign Affairs Minister Phil Goff announced on Sunday that both governments had agreed in principle to the operation. Preparations for the deployment coincide with a recent decision to commit New Zealand military personnel and aircraft to support the brutal imposition of colonial style rule in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The decision marks a revival of the country’s colonial legacy in the Pacific. The last time such an expedition was mounted, it was to suppress the Mau rebellion against New Zealand rule over Samoa. That operation culminated in the infamous 1929 “Black Saturday” massacre in which New Zealand troops opened fire with a machine gun on unarmed Samoan protesters, killing nine and wounding over fifty.

New Zealand does not intend to be a reluctant junior partner in the Solomons. The New Zealand ruling elite is moving decisively, along with Australia, to aggressively assert its strategic and economic interests in the South Pacific. Goff spent the weekend in discussions with Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer in Adelaide, finalising a joint position to take to the Pacific Forum foreign ministers meeting in Sydney on Monday.

Their consultation followed extensive high-level discussions last week in Canberra involving New Zealand and Australian Defence Ministers Mark Burton and Senator Robert Hill, New Zealand Police Minister George Hawkins, Police Commissioner Rob Robinson and Australian and Solomon Island counterparts, and senior trans-Tasman military and defence officials.

New Zealand government spokesmen are in complete accord with their Australian counterparts about armed

intervention. According to Goff, the Solomons is a “failed state”, in danger of becoming a “haven for terrorists and drug traffickers”. “We see this as a crisis situation requiring a regional response,” he said. With the Solomons “close to anarchy”, any police deployment would need “military support” because of the vast number of high-powered weapons in the hand of various “competing groups and criminals”.

Echoing the phrasing used by Clark to justify sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, Goff said New Zealand’s role in the Solomons would be that of “a good international citizen”, but added that the country was also “protecting its own interests”. Goff was clear that armed intervention would be a “significant watershed” in Pacific affairs, but if the situation was left, things could be “so chaotic” there could be demands for intervention from much further afield, through either the United Nations or the Commonwealth.

According to Goff, a formal request from the Solomon Islands government would be needed so that the operation was not “seen as some kind of neo-colonial occupation or an invasion”—in other words, to provide suitable diplomatic cover for precisely that.

After close consultation with Australia, New Zealand will contribute 40 senior police officers and up to 200 troops to the 2,000-strong contingent. The troops will be armed with Steyr 5.56mm rifles, light machine guns, grenade launchers and 9mm pistols. The police are likely to be armed with police-issue 9mm Glock pistols.

Joint Australian and New Zealand plans for the Solomons initially include a long-term colonial-style administration over the country. The strategy involves a 10-year involvement, with “experts” from the main regional powers, according to one report in the *Dominion Post*, “embedded throughout the Solomons

administration.”

The New Zealand political establishment is united behind the venture. For weeks past, the local media has played its part as cheerleader, with an unending series of reports depicting the dire situation in the Solomons as requiring military intervention. The headlines have served up a regular diet of calls to action: “Fear and frustration rife in island paradise”, “Bringing law to a lawless land”, “Military plans to hit Solomon Island thugs hard”, “Corrupt police force big part of problem in the Solomons says Goff”, “NZ prepared to be part of armed force to tame strife-torn islands”, “Solomon Islands plea for Anzac special forces”, and underlining business concerns, “Cargo-cult mentality hurting the Solomons, says banker”.

For its part, the Australian government is anxious for the involvement of New Zealand in order to not appear to be acting unilaterally. “You do come up against the sense in the Pacific that Australia is this sort of superpower and can be a little aggressive, so we want to find a balance here of making sure the problem is fixed ... but not in a way that is going to cause massive diplomatic fallout in the region,” Downer told the National Press Club in Canberra last week. He praised the Clark government, saying it had been “just wonderful on this issue. ...I can’t tell you how close the co-operation’s been... but we look to them to provide some military support. They did a great job in Timor.”

All the New Zealand political parties agree on deployment, even though the risks to the lives of young soldiers are acknowledged as being high. The only matter for discussion is over the terms of the commitment, with opposition parties admonishing the government that it must be prepared for a “long-term” involvement, and that the troops must be suitably equipped and supported.

The Greens, who posed as the main “antiwar” party to the left of Labour over Iraq, is yet to release any statement on the deployment. However, its record is one of enthusiastically promoting the so-called international “peacekeeping” ventures of New Zealand’s armed forces. Greens defence spokesman Keith Locke led demands for New Zealand to be in the forefront of the invasion of East Timor, and since then has enthusiastically supported Labour’s moves to re-configure the country’s armed forces to facilitate its rapid deployment in regional situations such as the

Solomons.



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