

New Zealand: Labour government dispatches SAS troops to Afghanistan

John Braddock
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Following recent talks with the Bush administration, the New Zealand government announced earlier this month that 50 Special Air Services (SAS) troops will be sent to Afghanistan at the beginning of April for “long range reconnaissance and direct action missions.” The deployment is initially for a period of six months.

The return of New Zealand’s elite front-line troops to Afghanistan—following a previous year-long deployment during the US-led invasion—is a direct response to US pressure for support for its current military operations on the Afghan-Pakistan border. The New Zealand SAS will join 11,000 US troops in a coordinated hunt with 70,000 Pakistani soldiers for top Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders and to suppress the ongoing armed opposition to the US-backed regime in Kabul.

Labour Prime Minister Clark justified the decision by saying she wanted Afghanistan to get the chance to “rebuild” so that it did not become “a failed state where people like bin Laden and friends can operate freely.” She believed “the eye went off the ball in Afghanistan through 2003” and there was much to do to make up “lost ground.” Clark reversed her previous policy of keeping SAS troop deployments secret for “security” reasons. While not going into detail, she said that they would be working with soldiers from other countries and contributing their skills in reconnaissance, surveillance and tracking.

The Bush administration’s “spring offensive” has nothing to do with the welfare of the Afghan people. The overriding aim is to capture Osama bin Laden or his close associates to provide Bush with a much-needed media coup in the lead up to the US presidential elections. At the same time, the US military is seeking to crush the dogged resistance to the continued presence of US-led forces in Afghanistan.

More than two dozen US and International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) troops have been killed this

year—proportionately a worse death toll than in Iraq. Some areas are returning to Taliban control, particularly at night, and US and ISAF forces have come under fire more often in the past three months than in all of the previous 15. In a sign of growing desperation, two US attacks killed 15 children in the week before Christmas.

Labour’s decision further underscores its alignment to the Bush administration, after a brief period during the Iraq war when it sided with the European powers in seeking UN approval for the Iraq invasion. The White House rapidly brought Clark to heel after she remarked last March that the US might not have invaded Iraq had Gore been elected US president. New Zealand was pointedly excluded from a free trade deal negotiated with Australia, a far more willing and vociferous supporter of Washington.

Clark soon fell into line. A contingent of 60 army engineers was sent to operate alongside British forces in southern Iraq, in addition to the 100 already in Afghanistan. Late last year, Clark visited the Iraq-based unit and the “provincial reconstruction team” in Afghanistan’s Bamian province. She met Afghan President Hamid Karzai, giving his puppet administration her seal of approval. According to Clark, Karzai expressed his “deep appreciation for New Zealand’s assistance.”

In the face of widespread domestic opposition, the Labour government has insisted that New Zealand’s military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan was purely of a “peacekeeping” character. In December, however, the *Sunday Star Times* published material by researcher Nicky Hager showing that New Zealand troops were intimately integrated into the occupation activities of the British forces in southern Iraq.

Documents obtained by Hager proved New Zealand army engineers were repairing British military equipment, building road-blocks and fortifications and doing general

logistics work for the British. The Rules of Engagement gave New Zealanders the right to use “deadly force,” not only to defend themselves but also British military property and “designated” people. New Zealand military publications cited examples of the engineers building fortifications, guarding British posts, and repairing British military craft, including combat support boats.

In response to New Zealand’s military efforts, relations with the US began to thaw. In December, US Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz announced that governments which had been critical of the Iraq war, including France and Germany, would be excluded from \$US18.6 billion worth of reconstruction contracts funded by the US Congress. Notably New Zealand was not on the blacklist, as it was now favourably regarded in Washington as a “force-contributing nation.”

At the same time, New Zealand has exploited the “war on terror” to advance its own interests as a minor imperialist power in the Asia-Pacific region. Along with Canberra, Wellington has justified its increasingly aggressive intervention into the affairs of the tiny island nations of the Pacific by arguing they are in danger of becoming “failed states” and “terrorist havens.” Under the pretext of reestablishing law and order, Australia and New Zealand dispatched a joint task force to the Solomon Islands late last year to take over key aspects of the nation’s administration.

In February this year, New Zealand Foreign Minister Phil Goff joined his Australian counterpart Alexander Downer and US Attorney General John Ashcroft at an “anti-terrorism” summit in Bali to berate Asian and Pacific nations for not pulling their weight in the “war on terror.” Goff complained that many countries in the region had not signed or legislated for the 12 UN conventions on terrorism and demanded that “lagging nations” tighten their “legal frameworks” against terrorism. The meeting concluded with a decision to establish a joint “anti-terror centre” based in Indonesia.

Labour’s increasingly forthright involvement in the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism” has received fulsome praise in media circles. The *New Zealand Herald* applauded the return of the SAS to “frontline service,” saying it would bring New Zealand “back where it belongs, side by side with the United States and Australia in a just and necessary military campaign.” While the government had been correct to “absent itself” from the Iraq “folly,” it was doing the right thing now, and if that should help “restore New Zealand’s stocks in Washington, well and good.” The capture of bin Laden,

according to the *Herald*, is necessary for “Western security.”

There is mounting pressure in New Zealand ruling circles to further accommodate to the US. The main big business mouthpiece, the *National Business Review*, in addition to criticising the government for being an “on-again, off-again partner” in the war on terrorism, has called for the country’s 20-year old anti-nuclear legislation to be ditched. The legislation, which bans nuclear armed or powered warships entering the country’s ports, has been responsible for a rift in defence ties with the US and Australia since being enacted by the Labour government in the mid-1980s.

In January, six Republican senators with what the *Review* called “top shelf credentials” on policy and budget matters visited New Zealand for talks about trade and other matters, including New Zealand’s anti-nuclear stance. The group, led by Oklahoma senator Don Nickles, chair of the Senate budget Committee, met with both Foreign Minister Goff and the leader of the opposition, Don Brash.

The return of troops to Afghanistan is accompanied by other measures aimed at boosting New Zealand’s role in operations alongside the US. The government announced it will extend the commitment of Defence Force personnel to provide “command and leadership” training to the Afghan National Army to June 2005. It will also redeploy the frigate Te Mana to the Maritime Interdiction Operation in the Gulf of Oman for four months from April 2004. The frigate will operate as far west as the Horn of Africa, to “monitor shipping” for supposed Taliban and Al Qaeda personnel. An Air Force Orion aircraft is likely to be dispatched as well, operating in the same region as the RNZN frigate.



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