

New Zealand government extends military deployments in Afghanistan

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Late last month, Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark announced an extension of New Zealand's military deployments in Afghanistan and, for the first time, the deployment of police personnel to that country. The decision widens the government's original troop commitment, guaranteeing a further 12 months' presence at least through to September 2006.

Following the announcement, the largest-ever contingent of New Zealand soldiers, a 121-member so-called Provincial Reconstruction Team, began its tour of duty in Bamiyan Province, replacing a slightly smaller contingent that has returned home. Two NZ Police personnel have simultaneously been based at the Bamiyan Regional Police Training Centre, one of seven in the country, working alongside German, UK and US personnel training the Afghan police force.

In other new appointments, a Military Liaison Officer has been assigned to the UN Assistance Mission for one year, acting in a "strategic interface" capacity between the occupying multinational forces and the Afghan authorities. Four Defence Force (NZDF) officers have been placed with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which works closely with the Afghan Transitional Authority on "security" matters in Kabul and other regions, while two NZDF personnel are deployed in the multinational force operational headquarters.

Plans for further imperialist operations under the guise of the US-led "war on terror" are also on the agenda, with a simultaneous announcement that the police have formed a special unit to—in the words of a *Dominion Post* headline—"go global" in order to "help restore law and order in the world's trouble spots".

Clark claimed that New Zealand was making a difference in restoring stability and democracy to Afghanistan. In fact Afghanistan, one of the poorest

countries in the world, remains subject to a military occupation, enforced by 18,000 US-led troops, intent on suppressing any opposition to the US-installed puppet regime in Kabul. Last year's presidential elections, which Clark enthusiastically endorsed, were a mockery of democracy. Washington's obvious choice, Hamid Karzai, won the presidential poll under conditions where the US acts as the country's military overlord and principal financial controller. The forthcoming round of elections will be no more democratic.

According to a report in the *New Zealand Herald*, the New Zealand forces in Bamiyan Province have been responsible for providing logistical support for the bogus elections, including transporting ballot boxes, the location and destruction of "illegal munitions" and working closely with UN agencies that "generally try to distance themselves from any association with the military" over the provision of aid. One of the key tasks of the newly dispatched force will be the disarming of the militias of "a few rogue commanders"—namely those opposed to the US-backed Karzai regime—in the south of the province.

Less prominence has been given to the activities of New Zealand's highly secretive crack Special Air Services unit, which has completed two tours of duty in Afghanistan. Before Christmas the Bush administration presented rare special citations to the unit and its commanding officer for their role supporting US troops in critical combat missions. The ceremony and its significance were uncharacteristically played down by the government's normally effusive spin machine. While the SAS is currently back in New Zealand, Clark recently indicated she was "not averse" to sending the unit back to Afghanistan should there be further need for its "specialist role".

Explicit details of the activities of this 50-strong force have never been released. Bits of evidence that have come to light confirm it has been involved in front line offensive operations. Documents leaked from NZDF headquarters last year revealed plans for the SAS to engage in raids, ambushes, direct assaults, attacks from the air, ground or sea, guide precision weaponry and conduct independent sabotage operations. When two of its soldiers were wounded last June, an SAS unit commander revealed that the forces were operating on their own and were “a long, long way from the normal conventional forces”.

Despite Clark’s attempts at obfuscation on the one hand, and outright suppression of information on the other, the reality is that New Zealand’s military involvement is aimed at bolstering the US campaign to overcome internal opposition and strengthen its neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan. In the face of long-held suspicions regarding the global aims of US militarism, and widespread popular opposition to the war in Iraq, Clark has been obliged to try and mask the Labour government’s support for the Bush administration’s agenda by invoking humanitarian concerns.

Speaking to more appreciative audiences, however, she has left no one in doubt about where her sympathies lie. In a speech last July to an Australian audience of CEOs from major banks, media groups and financial institutions, Clark asserted that New Zealand’s military record in the course of the “war on terror” had been “second to none”. On a per capita basis, she argued, New Zealand deployments in both Afghanistan and East Timor were larger than those of Australia. She then went on to remind her influential listeners that New Zealand had supported the Australian-led invasion of the Solomon Islands “from the outset,” and had committed itself to maintain a military presence there for at least two more years.



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