

Australian government sends troops back to Afghanistan

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The Australian government is sending troops back to Afghanistan some two-and-a-half years after they were withdrawn. An elite force of 150 Special Air Service (SAS) personnel and Army commandos will be dispatched in September for a 12-month tour, following the deployment of 450 Australian troops to southern Iraq in February. An additional 200-strong engineering unit is likely to be sent to Afghanistan in April 2006.

Prime Minister Howard made the decision with his trademark contempt for the widespread opposition among Australian working people toward involvement in the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. On July 11, with an announcement imminent, the prime minister told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “When you taken decisions of this kind you don’t first do an opinion poll.” The Australian parliament was given no opportunity to debate or discuss the deployment, which was discussed at a Coalition cabinet meeting behind closed doors on July 12. Howard formally announced the deployment at a press conference the following day.

The decision to dispatch the SAS followed a public request the week before by the Afghanistan ambassador to Australia. But it was clearly the product of months of concerted pressure by Washington and the British government for a greater Australian role in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The American military and the Bush administration face a mounting crisis produced by the ever-escalating resistance to the US takeover of the two countries. More than 130,000 US troops are tied down fighting an anti-occupation insurgency in Iraq, with no end in sight. If anything, more troops will be required over the next six months as Washington’s puppet government in Baghdad attempts to finalise a new constitution and hold elections in December.

At the same time, the last 12 months have seen a steady increase in resistance in Afghanistan, to the point where the current force is insufficient to maintain occupation control. Only 18,000 American troops and an 8,000-strong NATO force are in the country, while fewer than 20,000 men have been recruited and trained into the pro-US Afghan army. Entire regions are controlled by warlords who have no loyalty to the Kabul government, and there is widespread hostility to the presence of foreign troops.

The border provinces with Pakistan have become the focus of the armed resistance. Armed groups, with the active support of the region’s ethnic Pashtun tribes, are crossing back and forth over the 2,100-kilometre border, launching attacks and taking control of

villages and towns. On July 12, the main airport in Kandahar, the major city in the south-west, was hit by rockets, wounding two Canadian soldiers. Fighting has also taken place over recent days in the provinces of Zabul, Paktika and Paktia. As well, the Pakistani military, which has 70,000 troops deployed along the border to ostensibly try and stop the flow of guerillas into Afghanistan, has been involved in clashes in the province of North Waziristan.

American and government troops have been forced to conduct a series of offensives this year against the guerillas. At the end of June, one such operation resulted in the shooting down of a Chinook helicopter and the loss of 19 American soldiers. According to US military body counts, as many as 450 Afghan fighters have been killed in the last three months, at the cost of 45 American lives and dozens wounded. US air strikes on villages alleged to be guerilla bases have claimed the lives of scores of civilians and fueled anger at the occupation and further support for the resistance.

Under US operational command, the function of the Australian SAS—an elite unit trained for counter-terrorism and long-range reconnaissance—will be to assist in the suppression of the burgeoning opposition, which is expected to intensify in the weeks leading up to the scheduled parliamentary elections in September.

A general build-up of foreign troops in Afghanistan is underway, with Britain assuming a far more prominent role. The Blair government is sending an additional 3,000 British troops, along with new Spanish, Dutch and Romanian units, to boost the total NATO force to over 10,000. An additional 800-strong battalion of US paratroopers is also being deployed. According to British Ministry of Defence documents leaked to the press, the British force in southern Iraq will be reduced from 8,000 to just 1,000 by April 2007, in order to sustain the stepped-up commitment in Afghanistan.

Howard has justified the decision to send the SAS with a combination of lies and obfuscation. He told the press on July 13: “We have seen a situation where we, we meaning the allies, had great initial success and the Taliban was routed and a legitimate government was installed. And in recent months there has been a resurgence and it’s very important in the war on terror because of the obvious connection between Al Qaeda, the Taliban and Afghanistan that those attempts of recent times, renewed attempts to undermine the government of Afghanistan, are not successful.”

Why there has been a “resurgence” of fighting against the US-

led forces, Howard did not seek to explain. The main motivation for the resistance, however, is the desperate backwardness, misery and poverty that face the mass of the Afghan population, and the deep-going hostility toward the presence of foreign troops.

The primary aim of the US-led invasion in November 2001 was to exploit the September 11, 2001 terror attacks to put into motion long-standing plans for intervention into Central Asia—one of the most resource-rich areas of the world. The overthrow of the Taliban has enabled the Bush administration to establish a compliant regime in Kabul, as well as military bases in Afghanistan and a number of other Central Asian states. US imperialism is seeking to use its geopolitical dominance to dictate the manner in which lucrative oil and gas fields are exploited, at the expense of its main rivals in Europe and Japan, and regional powers such as Iran, China and Russia.

The plight of the Afghan population has been a matter of complete indifference. While US and allied military operations against alleged Al Qaeda and Taliban targets have killed or maimed thousands, at least five million people still live on the verge of starvation. Life expectancy in Afghanistan is just 44 years, and social and educational infrastructure barely exists. The bulk of the so-called “reconstruction” work is geared toward meeting the military and economic interests of the occupying powers.

Drought and desperation have led several million Afghan peasant farmers to turn back to growing opium poppies in order to live. In a UN-organised survey in 2003, 31 percent of farmers said they would grow poppy to “alleviate poverty”, with another 30 percent declaring they would do so due to “high prices”. Afghanistan’s poppy harvest reached close to 4,000 metric tons in 2004, valued at over \$2.3 billion and representing nearly 75 percent of world opium production. Before the US invasion, the flow of opium and heroin out of Afghanistan had begun to dry up, due to a prohibition by the Taliban regime in 2000 on poppy crops.

For many rural people, their only contact with the occupation forces and the Kabul government has been when they have come to destroy fields or demand that other crops are grown. While there are plans to eradicate more than 50 percent of the poppy crop this year, farmers complain they have not been given promised compensation, alternate seed or finances for irrigation systems. The predominantly Pashtun Kandahar province, which was the focus of eradication operations last year, is now one of the centres of the resurgent fighting.

With next to no evidence, all Afghan resistance is being labeled by the Australian and US governments as the work of remnants of the former Taliban regime or members of Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network. But the people of Afghanistan, a complex tapestry of ethnic and linguistic groups and tribal loyalties, have a 200-hundred year tradition of opposing great power domination.

Like the Soviet Union in the 1980s, US imperialism has embroiled itself in an intractable war against a hostile population. As part of the sordid quid pro quos that have accompanied Howard’s backing for the Bush administration, the Australian government is being called upon to supply an increasing number of the troops to fight it.

Domestically, this provides Canberra with certain temporary

advantages. Whereas millions of people view Iraq as a dirty war for oil, sending forces to Afghanistan can be more easily packaged as a struggle against Al Qaeda, “terrorism” and Taliban obscurantism.

Howard, however, has only been able to get away with his propaganda and lies due to the support he has received from virtually the entire Australian political and media establishment.

The Labor Party opposition supported the troop deployment in identical language to Howard’s. Labor leader Kim Beazley declared Afghanistan was “terror central and there is a direct Australian national interest in ensuring the success of the struggle against the remnants of the former Taliban regime and Al Qaeda”. His only criticism was that troops should have been sent earlier. Labor has been calling for more troops to Afghanistan since the beginning of 2004.

The deployment was also endorsed by media commentators, who have backed the Howard government’s support for the Bush administration since day one. It was also hailed, however, by one of the more prominent media critics of the Iraq occupation, the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s Paul McGeough. The journalist wrote on July 13 that a “genuine frontline role in the pursuit of bin Laden and the Taliban would be a money-where-our mouth-is use of Australian military resources that has been absent in post-invasion Iraq and Afghanistan”.

The reality is that the Australian government is using its military forces to provide the Bush administration’s predatory, neo-colonial activities with a veneer of international support. In return, Howard has secured American backing for a series of Australian interventions in the South Pacific, certain trade concessions and a share, however small, in the post-invasion carve-up of Iraq’s resources.

A genuine struggle by the working class against this imperialist agenda can only be developed through a complete break with the Labor Party and the entire official establishment, and the construction of an independent political movement based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

The Socialist Equality Party of Australia and the *World Socialist Web Site* demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Australian, American and other foreign forces from Iraq and Afghanistan. In the face of imperialist militarism, the working class internationally has the responsibility to uphold the right of the Afghan and Iraqi people to determine their own political future.



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