

# New Zealand government extends Afghanistan military operations

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New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark announced on April 10 that the country's military intervention in Afghanistan is to be extended until September 2007. The latest deployment of a 120-strong Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Bamiyan and other military postings were originally due to expire in September.

Clark said it was in "everyone's interests" that Afghanistan had a "stable government" and the PRT provided a valuable contribution to this objective. Clark's comments underlined her government's agreement with and subservience to the Bush administration's "war on terror". "I think the whole world community has an interest in Afghanistan not deteriorating as it did prior to September 11 as a haven for terrorist activities," she said.

In fact, the US-led subjugation of Afghanistan has no more to do with combating terrorism than does the invasion of Iraq. Afghanistan is part of a wider strategy for dominance of the resource-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. Afghanistan is adjacent to both regions as well as to the increasingly important Indian subcontinent.

New Zealand's role in assisting the US to secure the Afghan front in its global operations has been noted in Washington. The current foreign policy of the Clark Labour government represents a shift from its previous anti-nuclear posturing which, in the mid-1980s, led to the breakdown of the ANZUS defence alliance with Australia and the US.

Over the past six years, Labour has unerringly moved—at times accompanied by a smokescreen of protests and appeals for UN resolutions—to accommodate Washington's demands. In Afghanistan, the Clark government has backed the US to the hilt, committing troops from the beginning of the Bush

administration's intervention. New Zealand's prompt support for the invasion earned the plaudits of then US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who declared the Labour government to be a "very, very, very good friend" of the White House.

New Zealand has been involved in military operations in Afghanistan since December 2001 and the so-called "reconstruction team" was deployed in September 2003. Last year the PRT was responsible for providing logistical support for the bogus Afghanistan elections, transporting ballot boxes, locating and destroying "illegal munitions" and working closely with UN agencies. One of the key tasks was to disarm the militias opposing the US-backed Karzai regime.

New Zealand has so far spent \$NZ130 million on operations in Afghanistan. Last week's decision involves further defence spending of \$27.08 million for the PRT and \$3.91 million to cover Afghan army training and other associated deployment costs. Current NZ forces are serving under the American-led command, but this will transfer to NATO in the near future.

Defence Minister Phil Goff boasted last week that New Zealand was the third country to establish a "reconstruction" team and hundreds of defence personnel had served there. Goff said the decision to extend operations would also apply to two defence force personnel helping train the Afghan National Army; three with the International Security Assistance Force Headquarters; one with the Command Afghanistan in Kabul; and one with the Coalition Joint Taskforce in Bagram.

In mid-March Clark and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had what Clark described as an extremely "cordial" meeting in Santiago while attending the inauguration of Chilean president Michele

Bachelet. Clark said the two had “a very pleasant conversation” in which Rice expressed the Bush administration’s “appreciation for what we had done in Afghanistan”. Clark responded by assuring Rice that the continuing presence of New Zealand troops in Afghanistan could be taken for granted.

On recent visits to New Zealand, two top-level US officials have also publicly conveyed the Bush administration’s gratitude over Afghanistan. Their comments followed a speech by Foreign Minister Winston Peters in which he complained the US was not giving New Zealand the “respect or credit” it deserved for its “security” role in the Pacific. While Peters is leader of the minority right-wing populist party New Zealand First and a minister outside cabinet, both Clark and Goff endorsed the comments.

US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill responded during his visit on March 18-19. Hill praised New Zealand’s role in Afghanistan and the Pacific, saying the two countries could work “even more closely” in the future. Hill singled out the activities of the PRT in Afghanistan, which was operating, he said, in a “very, very tough situation”. Hill told reporters that what the troops were doing “was extremely important” and the US administration was “very, very pleased the Kiwis have been with us”.

Several weeks earlier, the top-ranking commander of the US forces in the Middle East, General John Abizaid, delivered a similar message. Following a meeting with Clark on February 23, Abizaid said that while he was unable to comment on Pacific affairs, New Zealand’s contribution in Afghanistan had been “very helpful to the coalition”.

A spokesman for Clark said that she and Abizaid had discussed “military operations New Zealand was involved in [in] Afghanistan and Iraq”. This was a significant admission. For public consumption Clark has persistently claimed that New Zealand’s involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan was for “peacekeeping,” not military purposes. In Iraq, the government committed 60 army engineers, warships to patrol the Gulf region, and aircraft to assist with supplies. The engineers, who were based in southern Iraq, operated under the direct control of the British—the joint invading force and occupying power.

Not mentioned in press releases, but no doubt at the

centre of discussions between Clark and the US envoys, were the activities of New Zealand’s secretive Special Air Services unit, which has completed two tours of duty in Afghanistan. The Bush administration in 2004 presented rare special citations to the unit and its commanding officer for their role supporting US troops in combat missions. Clark has indicated she is “not averse” to sending the unit back to Afghanistan should there be further need for its “specialist role”.

As with Australia, one of the chief purposes of New Zealand’s support for the “war on terror” was to get the support of the US in particular for the predatory activities of NZ imperialism in the Pacific. Clark and Peters now appear to have won explicit approval from both the US and Britain for the country’s expanding role as a regional policeman. At the end of British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s trip to Auckland last month, he and Clark issued a joint statement declaring that New Zealand would increasingly become “the ears and eyes for Britain” in the Pacific as Britain’s presence waned and China’s increased.



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