

New Zealand joins Australia's military occupation of East Timor

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The New Zealand Labour government last month dispatched nearly 200 troops to support the Australian-led military occupation of East Timor. Underlining the close Australian and New Zealand collaboration in neo-colonial exercises throughout the region, the contingent includes soldiers who were deployed in the initial 1999 intervention in East Timor, some who had recently served in the Solomon Islands, and a group of military police just returned from Afghanistan.

Using social unrest and the fracturing of East Timor's security forces as the pretext, the Australian government pressed Dili into issuing an "invitation" on May 24 and immediately began landing 1,300 troops as well as additional support staff and police. New Zealand troops were not far behind. The barely disguised purpose of the intervention is to effect a "regime change" in the impoverished statelet and tighten Canberra's grip on oil and gas resources in the region.

The rapidity with which New Zealand joined the venture is a measure of Labour's complete accommodation to Washington and Canberra. Like Australia, New Zealand regards the Asia-Pacific region as its own "backyard", where it has longstanding strategic, business and trading interests. Plans have recently been mooted to revive the extensive use of Pacific peoples as a source of imported cheap labour.

As Australian Prime Minister John Howard has assumed the role of Washington's "deputy sheriff" in the region, his New Zealand counterpart Helen Clark has tagged along as the deputy's assistant. In providing support whenever and wherever required, Wellington expects a quid pro quo—US and Australian backing for its own interests in the Pacific.

Clark justified the latest intervention in East Timor, by decrying the "loss of law and order" and calling for a "robust show of force" to deal with the situation. Defence Minister Phil Goff proclaimed that the vast majority of the population would "welcome the presence of the Kiwis and the Aussies" and the "ability of our troops to provide them protection and take life back to normal". Events quickly proved the opposite.

The first contingent of 42 troops arrived in the capital Dili on May 27. The platoon's immediate task was to secure the New Zealand embassy. According the *Dominion Post* newspaper, the embassy was forcibly evacuated after it had been targeted by a "violent mob" consisting of "thugs with machetes".

Ambassador Ruth Nuttall had relocated to the Australian compound after she had given refuge to two teenagers fleeing the violence.

Two days later, the platoon was boosted to full company strength with the arrival of 120 troops who had earlier been flown to an Australian base in Townsville on stand-by. The full deployment had been held up for several days while Clark sought a veneer of legitimacy from the UN. There were various "legal forms" to follow, she said, while all the intervening powers were "very conscious of wanting full Security Council support for this".

On arrival, the troops were placed under the Australian military command and assigned to "security" responsibilities in the eastern suburbs of Dili. The NZ troops were described as patrolling some of Dili's "toughest districts", tasked with "bringing gangs of thugs to heel in townships razed by violence". Their presence, however, has done little to halt the violence as rival gangs of poorly armed youth have continued to torch vehicles and houses.

Clark has pledged a paltry \$500,000 in humanitarian aid. However, daily television footage from East Timor shows a gathering social catastrophe, with thousands of people without food, water, sanitation and shelter. Food riots have periodically erupted as thousands queue for meagre handouts. While professing concern for the East Timorese, the occupying powers have no plans to help the estimated 100,000 displaced people, let alone address the broader social needs of the poverty stricken nation.

Pointing to the real purpose, Clark quickly lined up behind one of the Howard government's chief objectives—to remove Timorese Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, who is regarded as too close to rival Portugal. She endorsed Howard's public comments that East Timor has not been "well-governed," saying the country was "back to square one after considerable international efforts to ease the country into existence". "I think at its root this is a political and leadership failure of considerable dimensions," she declared.

Just prior to the East Timor intervention, Goff and Australian Defence Minister Brendan Nelson met in New Zealand on May 20 to discuss closer collaboration. In April, the two countries sent hundreds of police and troops to bolster the Australian-led

occupation of the Solomon Islands where protests and rioting erupted following national elections. The anger was not only directed at local politicians, but against the takeover of the country by foreign officials, soldiers and police.

After meeting Nelson, Goff declared that recent developments in East Timor, Bougainville, and Fiji emphasised the importance of the two countries working together to achieve “security and stability in the region”. In an ominous warning to other regional governments, he explained that New Zealand and Australia had already planned responses for Timor, the Solomons and Fiji should “trouble flare”.

Clark has presided over a foreign policy shift. New Zealand was marginalised from the longstanding ANZUS military alliance with Australia and the US after passing anti-nuclear legislation in 1985 that effectively prevented visits by US warships. Its acceptance back into the fold was signalled last month by Christopher Hill, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs. He declared that the anti-nuclear law—the centrepiece of New Zealand’s purported “independent” foreign policy—should no longer see it sidelined from ANZUS and closer military ties.

The foreign policy re-orientation began in 1999 with New Zealand’s support for the Australian-led military intervention in East Timor—again on the pretext of helping the East Timorese. Then in opposition, Labour and its “left” allies, the Greens and Alliance, vigorously pushed for the dispatch of troops under the guise of combatting pro-Indonesian militia and securing East Timor’s independence. The most vociferous proponents of the “troops in” lobby were the various middle class protest outfits.

The three parties pushed for East Timor to be put on the official agenda at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Auckland. Alliance MP Matt Robson, fresh from a trip to East Timor to observe the UN referendum on independence, demanded that an armed UN force be dispatched with or without any invitation. Greens co-leader Rod Donald said he was “intensely angry” that New Zealand troops had been committed to other APEC duties and would not be immediately available for action in East Timor.

In 2001, the Clark government quickly sided with the Bush administration’s fraudulent “war on terror”. New Zealand committed troops to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, again with the unanimous parliamentary support of the “left-wing” Alliance. In the lead-up to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the Labour government initially sided with those claiming that a UN mandate was necessary, but subsequently endorsed the illegal occupation and sent army engineers to assist.

The hypocrisy of Clark’s “opposition” to the US aggression was summed up in March 2003 when, just prior to the invasion, Howard visited New Zealand. Despite Howard’s slavish support for the looming war, the two leaders “agreed to disagree” but “stay friends”. As Clark explained it: “We register the difference of opinion over the timetable and the

means, but there is no daylight between us on the objective,” which was to see Iraq “effectively disarmed” of its non-existent WMDs.

Clark was already preparing the ground for a shift. In what one news commentator described as a “trans-Tasman love-fest,” Howard promised to support New Zealand if the US attempted to lock it out of trade talks. In relation to the South Pacific, the two leaders agreed to promote a regional anti-terrorism unit, purportedly to help protect small states with limited resources. Just months later, the two countries launched their own military intervention into the Solomon Islands in July 2003, supposedly to prevent this “failed state” from becoming a haven for “international terrorists and criminals”.

The two countries have established a joint *modus operandi* to assert their dominant interests in the region and block Asian and European rivals. Under the banner of “good governance”, Canberra and Wellington are bullying the small Pacific Island states into accepting a far-reaching program of market reforms, supervised by Australian and New Zealand officials, to open them up to foreign capital. If that fails, then social and political unrest is seized upon to justify military intervention.

In this predatory policy, the Greens and the various “left” protest groups have played a critical role as the standard-bearers for New Zealand imperialism. Green Party foreign affairs spokesman Keith Locke, who postures as an opponent of the Iraq war, visited East Timor in 2001 with a parliamentary delegation to “support our troops there”. His recent “JustPeace” newsletter promotes comments by East Timorese Foreign Minister Jose Ramos-Horta calling for international “police advisers” to provide “stability”.

From the various middle class radical outfits that were the cheerleaders of the 1999 military intervention, there is virtually nothing in their publications and on their Internet sites about New Zealand’s blatant neo-colonial operations in the Solomon Islands and East Timor. Their deafening silence speaks volumes about their role as apologists for New Zealand imperialism and its crimes in 1999 and now.

As in the Solomon Islands, New Zealand troops are being prepared for a long-term occupation. Last week Clark said that the scale of the violence meant New Zealand and Australian troops would probably have to stay well into next year when fresh elections are scheduled. And as Goff’s comments on May 20 about Timor, the Solomons and Fiji indicate, further joint operations are already on the drawing board.



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