

# Australian government to deploy 150 extra troops to Afghanistan

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The Australian government announced on Wednesday that it will send another 150 troops to Afghanistan to provide extra security for a 240-strong force already deployed to Uruzgan province in the country's volatile southern region as part of a Dutch-led Provincial Reconstruction Team. The 400-strong military force is to remain for two years at a cost of \$366 million.

Prime Minister John Howard committed the extra troops despite widespread opposition to Australia's continuing participation in the US-led occupation of Iraq and deepening concern over its involvement in other neo-colonial operations in Afghanistan, East Timor and the Solomons.

The additional soldiers include an infantry company of 120 soldiers equipped with light armoured vehicles. The Australian military already has a force of 300, including a 190-strong SAS special forces task force and 110 troops supporting two Chinook heavy-lift helicopters, operating in Afghanistan alongside US troops.

The extra combat soldiers and armoured vehicles testify to the growing armed resistance to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, particularly in the Pashtun tribal areas of the south and east such as Uruzgan province.

In announcing the deployment, Howard admitted that security in Afghanistan was "the worst since the Taliban fell". He warned that the soldiers faced "significant risks" and "the possibility of ADF [Australian Defence Force] casualties cannot be discounted".

Afghanistan, like Iraq, has become a quagmire. US military spokesmen no longer speak of mopping up "Taliban remnants" but of recapturing towns and villages that have fallen under rebel control. Even the

so-called reconstruction teams are broadly despised as part of a crude propaganda effort to win local support and can only operate under heavy guard.

Speaking on the ABC's "The World Today", an unnamed security advisor last month described Uruzgan province as "one of the most dangerous regions in the country". He said the only secure area was that lying within one kilometre of the provincial capital Tarin Kowt but added that all major routes into the city were "compromised". Noting that "a lot of [aid] programs have shut recently, or are ineffective," he warned that Australian troops would be too busy defending themselves to carry out reconstruction work.

As the adviser acknowledged, opposition to foreign troops is not simply confined to loyalists of the deposed Taliban regime. For the past five years, US-led forces have waged a relentless campaign of repression in the Pashtun tribal areas along the border with Pakistan. Arbitrary round ups and arrests, the bombing of villages and the killing of innocent civilians have engendered deeply felt anger and hostility to the foreign occupation and provided a steady stream of recruits to various armed resistance groups.

A massive US-led offensive, codenamed Operation Mountain Thrust, was launched on June 15 in a bid to stamp out armed opposition across the southern provinces of Uruzgan, Kandahar, Zabul and Helmand. US spokesmen claimed that the operation, involving around 11,000 troops backed by warplanes and attack helicopters, killed over 600 "Taliban" fighters and injured many more. However, insurgent activity immediately rebounded after the operation ceased at the end of July.

Operation Mountain Thrust was designed to pave the way for a smooth transition from US to NATO command in the south of the country. The NATO-led

International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had previously been confined largely to the capital of Kabul but at the beginning of August assumed control of all forces in the southern provinces, allowing the US to cut its troop numbers in Afghanistan from 23,000 to 16,000.

Australian, as well as British, Canadian, Danish, Dutch and Estonian troops, are now in the direct firing line. Even as the ISAF assumed control of the south, four Canadian soldiers were killed and 10 wounded on August 4 when a car bomb exploded in a market in the Panjwai district of Kandahar. The number of Canadians killed in Afghanistan is now 23.

Three British soldiers died and a fourth was seriously wounded in an ambush on August 1 in Helmand province. Another was killed on August 6, bringing the number British fatalities since June 12 to ten. In the wake of latest deaths, Britain's defence staff chief Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup admitted he expected even greater casualties, declaring it "a sad but inevitable consequence of Britain sending forces into the highly dangerous region".

Over 70 foreign troops have been killed in Afghanistan since the beginning of the year—the majority in the south. The number of civilian casualties is unknown as the US-led coalition routinely describes anyone killed in operations as "enemy fighters". At least 1,100 Afghans have died in clashes since January.

Little is known about the activities of the secretive Australian SAS troops, who are specialists in reconnaissance, assassination and dirty operations. Their role in killing at least 11 Afghan villagers in a clash in 2002 only came to light after a SAS soldier was disciplined for taking souvenirs from the dead.

While no Australian soldiers have been killed in recent fighting, military analysts say it is only a matter of time. Last month six SAS soldiers were wounded in a skirmish with local militia.

The Howard government's willingness to risk the lives of Australian troops to further the Bush administration's ambitions for hegemony in Central Asia and the Middle East is to ensure US backing for its own neo-colonial adventures in the Asia-Pacific region.

As well as maintaining troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, Canberra has already indicated it may commit soldiers to a so-called "peacekeeping force" in

Lebanon. Speaking after a meeting with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Kuala Lumpur last month, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer stated that Australia could make "a niche contribution".

Early this month, Howard hinted at an expansion of the Australian military, saying: "Our defence forces are very heavily taxed at the moment. It is going to be like that for years into the future because we are seen by the rest of the world as the sort of security guardian in our region". Canberra already has large contingents of troops and police in the Solomon Islands and East Timor to secure Australian regional interests.

In a TV interview on the Nine Network, Defence Minister Brendan Nelson recently revealed: "The prime minister, in his long term vision for Australia and the Australian Defence Force, has indicated to me that he thinks it important that we consider the possibility and the options for increasing the size of our defence force, and in particularly the army. Over the next few months I'll be working through those ideas."

The ideas include not only the "relaxing of entry rules" to allow the speedy recruitment of a further 1,000 army personnel but spending \$1 billion on four Boeing C-17 transport planes and large sea vessels for the rapid deployment of large numbers of troops and equipment.



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