

New Zealand government announces extension of Afghanistan military operations

John Braddock
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New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark announced last week that the country's military intervention in Afghanistan will be extended until September 2008. The latest deployment of a 120-strong Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Bamiyan province and other military postings follows a similar 12-month extension announced last April.

A navy frigate will be dispatched to the Arabian Gulf next year, where US-allied vessels are patrolling, purportedly for Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives, after a planned deployment to the South East Asian region. This follows previous New Zealand naval deployments in the Gulf at the time of the invasion of Iraq.

The announcement was made a week before Clark's visit to the US to meet President Bush on March 20-21. It coincided with Bush's own announcement that the US will send an additional 3,500 troops to Afghanistan and 4,700 more to Iraq.

The ongoing troop commitment underlines the open-ended character of the so-called "war on terror". The Labour government is pledging to spend another \$30 million extending the New Zealand military presence in Afghanistan in the current year, with Clark indicating the government is planning to continue the commitment for at least another year beyond that.

The PRT contingent is characterised by government spokesmen and the media as a "peacekeeping force", engaged in benign activities such as building schools, medical facilities and basic infrastructure. It is in fact part of a criminal US-led army of occupation, propping up a fraudulent, unpopular government and oppressing the population of one of the most impoverished countries in the world. There are currently more than 33,000 foreign troops stationed in Afghanistan. The numbers have increased by 9,000 in less than a year as the occupying powers desperately attempt to subdue a

growing rebellion against their neo-colonial operations.

Previously under the US military command, the PRT is now operating as part of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). According to a report in the *New Zealand Herald* in early 2005, the PRT was responsible for providing logistical support for the bogus elections, including transporting ballot boxes, and the location and destruction of "illegal munitions". One of its key tasks was the disarming of the militias of "rogue commanders"—namely, those opposed to the US-backed puppet regime of Hamid Karzai.

In addition to the PRT, four New Zealand police will be dispatched to help train the Afghan national police force, two army personnel to train the Afghan National Army in Kabul, five officers will serve directly with the ISAF, and two health professionals will work at the Multinational Medical Unit at Kandahar airfield.

Clark and Defence Minister Phil Goff played down the significance of New Zealand's extended commitment, describing it as a "rollover" of existing arrangements. But they both used the occasion to boast of the "success" of the Afghanistan venture, emphasising that among non-NATO countries, New Zealand had the second-highest military contribution on a per-capita basis. Goff said the government was willing to send even more troops to Afghanistan but had to retain a certain contingent at home in case they were needed in places such as East Timor.

New Zealand's commitment to the "war on terror" is high on the list of topics for discussion during the two hours Clark will spend at the White House this week. So-called "instability" in the Pacific is also likely to be addressed, but in keeping with Clark's silence over the occupation of Iraq, she is not expected to raise this war with Bush.

Clark will receive a much warmer reception this time than in 2002, when, as the first New Zealand Labour leader to be invited to the White House in 20 years, she spent just an hour there. Meetings with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defence Robert Gates have been confirmed, with Clark also likely to receive an honour guard on the steps of the Pentagon. The prime minister will meet Bush for a half-hour private meeting and pose for photographs in the Oval Office before a working lunch with senior members of his administration.

According to the *New Zealand Herald*, officials claim the higher level of welcome reflects Clark's more "senior status", after seven years as prime minister and six APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation) forums, where she has met Bush each time. The real reasons, however, lie in the fact that the US sees New Zealand as an increasingly compliant and significant partner in its global "war on terror".

While recently moving to distance her government from the disaster in Iraq, Clark has persistently used the Afghanistan deployment to curry favour with the Bush administration. One result of the improved defence co-operation has been an acknowledgement by the US of New Zealand's place as a key player in the South Pacific.

Speaking of the closer defence relationship since both administrations set aside their differences over New Zealand's anti-nuclear legislation, Clark said New Zealand and the US worked together on a "practical level" wherever necessary. "Where we are at the moment is basically a pretty satisfactory situation. The reality is that since New Zealand committed into Afghanistan, there has been quite a lot of contact of an operational kind, ensuring that we do have the ability to work compatibly where we deploy alongside the US. I'm satisfied that we're pretty much where we need to be," she said.

New Zealand now has some 400 troops in 18 separate operational areas overseas, supporting the US "war on terror". Prompted by Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer during bi-lateral talks in New Zealand last month, Clark denounced Iran's lack of "transparency" over its nuclear program—thereby signalling her government's readiness to play a part in any operations against Iran.

According to the *Dominion Post* newspaper, the

White House talks represent a "new phase" in relations between Washington and Wellington. Like Australian Prime Minister John Howard, Clark is increasingly being regarded as an important partner, providing much-appreciated international backing for the illegal activities of the deeply despised US administration. In return, she will seek US support for New Zealand's own neo-colonial ambitions in the Pacific.



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