

US requests New Zealand SAS troops for war in Afghanistan

Tom Peters
30 April 2009

The New Zealand National government of Prime Minister John Key revealed on April 19 that it had received an official request from the United States for the highly trained Special Air Services (SAS) combat unit to return to Afghanistan.

The announcement followed a meeting on April 7 between Foreign Minister Murray McCully and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, during which Clinton praised New Zealand's involvement in the war over the past seven years and stated that "its elite SAS troops distinguished themselves early on".

The New Zealand government will respond to the request in August following a review of its Defence Force operations. While it has been careful not to forecast any decision, it is more than likely to send the troops.

Under the previous Clark Labour government, New Zealand participated in the criminal US-led invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent occupation of Iraq. After taking part in the initial assault, as many as 65 SAS soldiers spent a year in Afghanistan. In 2003, under considerable pressure from Washington, Labour sent a small engineering group to Iraq to work alongside British troops in Basra. At the same time, it also sent 100 Defence Force (NZDF) personnel—later increased to 140 troops—to run a so-called Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Afghanistan's Bamiyan Province. In 2004 and 2005, Prime Minister Helen Clark sent the SAS back to Afghanistan on six-month tours, working alongside other special forces in a US-led Joint Special Operations Taskforce.

The new National government has recently confirmed that the PRT will remain in Bamiyan until at least September 2010. A further 19 New Zealand police and military personnel are currently working with local officials in advisory positions. US commanders, however, are looking for combat contributions.

The Obama administration's request for the return of the NZ SAS comes as it prepares a major military escalation in Afghanistan and over the border into areas of Pakistan. Some 17,000 US additional troops and 4,000 trainers will join the

70,000 US and NATO soldiers already operating in the region. The US has compiled a "shopping list" of requests for extra forces from its NATO partners and other allies such as Australia and New Zealand.

The war in the impoverished country will become even bloodier in the months and years ahead. Obama's Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Michael Mullen recently told ABC television: "I want to be clear that my expectations are as we add more troops, the violence level in Afghanistan is going to go up."

If redeployed, the New Zealand SAS will assist in the systematic and ruthless campaign to exterminate Afghan resistance to the US-led occupation. The type of activities it will carry out is demonstrated in documents released late last year revealing what its Australian counterparts are currently doing. Australian Special Forces troops have reportedly become experts in "targeted killings" of suspected Taliban—that is, cold-blooded executions—which have at times resulted in the massacre of civilians.

Although the New Zealand military has released virtually no details of its previous deployments, in 2007 then Labour Defence Minister Phil Goff revealed details of a special citation given to the unit in December 2004 by George W. Bush.

Bush praised the SAS's activities, which included "search and rescue, special reconnaissance, sensitive site exploitation, direct action missions, destruction of multiple cave and tunnel complexes, identification and destruction of several known al Qaeda training camps, explosions of thousands of pounds of enemy ordnance".

An example of these operations was revealed in February 2007 by the *New Zealand Herald*. It reported that the SAS had captured 50 to 70 so-called "terrorist suspects" in 2002 in snatch-grab missions and handed them over to the US military for detention and interrogation. Instead of being identified, photographed and fingerprinted and properly registered, the "suspects" had their heads shaved, with no photos or ID taken.

Government spokespersons and the corporate media have repeatedly presented New Zealand's military deployments in Afghanistan as necessary contributions to the so-called "war on terror". Last Tuesday's *New Zealand Herald* editorial declared: "The motives that spurred an array of nations to join the United States in 2001 to oust al Qaeda and its protector, the Taliban, from Afghanistan remain. New Zealand, now as then, should be involved."

After seven years, however, the paper has dropped the long-standing pretence that the occupying forces are building democracy in Afghanistan. It claimed that "[t]he opportunity to transform it into a prosperous, functioning democracy has been missed". Instead, according to the *Herald*, the "best-case exit strategy would... see the Taliban rendered inoperative in Afghanistan, if not in Pakistan". The *Herald* blamed this "doleful prospect" on George Bush, "who squandered a golden opportunity to reconstruct Afghanistan by becoming distracted by Iraq".

The same paper applauded the deployment of army engineers to Iraq in 2003 with the claim that they would help restore "law and order", render the occupation "more acceptable" and "repair our standing in Washington".

The position of the Labour government during its three successive terms in office was no less hypocritical. While initially distancing itself from the Iraq invasion, in the face of widespread public revulsion over its brutal and criminal character, Labour legitimised the war. As soon as France and Germany gave their support to a United Nations amendment to allow "peacekeeping" operations in occupied Iraq, the New Zealand government followed suit and dispatched the troops.

At the same time, Clark always defended the New Zealand military operations in Afghanistan as a justified effort to build a "stable government" and prevent the country from "deteriorating as it did prior to September 11 as a haven for terrorist activities".

The present National government has taken the same stance. In an interview on TV One on April 19, Foreign Minister McCully claimed: "[T]he reason we would commit to doing something in Afghanistan is not to try and get something back from the US or anyone else, but to protect New Zealanders because we have as much interest as anyone in having a safe world."

The occupation of Afghanistan has nothing to do with ensuring "a safe world". It is a neo-colonial venture launched by US imperialism to gain control of a strategically important region that is rich in natural resources. Moreover, New

Zealand's participation is precisely to "get something back from the US". The country's financial and corporate establishment is looking to safeguard future trade negotiations and ensure that the US provides ongoing support to New Zealand for its own neo-colonial operations in the Pacific region.

Alongside Australian forces, New Zealand has nearly 100 military, police and other officials working in the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and 155 troops in East Timor. In Tonga and Fiji, both Australia and New Zealand are intent on protecting their commercial interests from political turmoil and countering the increasing influence of China, which now gives hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to the Pacific Island states.

Fiji's military junta, which came to power in a coup in 2006, scrapped the country's constitution earlier this month after three Appeals Court judges—all Australians—ruled that the government was unlawful. While Australia, New Zealand and the European Union have all cut aid payments to the country, the junta is defying the pressure, with the assistance of unconditional Chinese aid.

Last Monday, Key told TV One's "Breakfast" show that his government "would consider" sending troops to take part in a military intervention into Fiji as "part of a multilateral effort to stabilise peace in a dangerous situation". That evening Key told reporters that such a deployment was "not likely", but repeated that New Zealand would do so if it was asked "by a multilateral agency like the United Nations".

During her April 7 press conference with McCully in Washington, Clinton offered US backing to the efforts to pressure the Fijian military to change course. She stated: "We join New Zealand in encouraging Fiji's interim government to abide by the Pacific Islands Forum's benchmarks and timetable to restore democracy to that country. We share a common determination that democracy must not be extinguished there."

Ten days later, McCully's announcement that the government was considering sending the SAS back to Afghanistan was no coincidence. It simply revealed Washington's price.



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