

New Zealand government redeploys elite SAS troops to Afghanistan

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12 August 2009

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key announced on Monday that his government was redeploying elite Special Air Service (SAS) troops to the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan. The decision follows a request from the Obama administration.

Some 70 SAS personnel will be sent in three rotations, initially lasting 18 months. They will join the 130 New Zealand troops serving as a so-called Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), which will remain in Afghanistan for another five years, “re-aligned” to help train the Afghan police. Key also announced a beefed-up civilian role in Bamiyan province with a focus on agriculture, health and education. An ambassador will now be stationed in the country, rather than in Tehran as at present.

The latest SAS deployment marks the fourth time the highly-trained specialist fighting squad has been dispatched to Afghanistan. The Helen Clark-led Labour government first sent the squad in 2002 following the initial US-led invasion, and it completed its last tour of duty in 2005.

Key’s decision to renew the combat commitment came as the top US general in Afghanistan warned that the Taliban were gaining the “upper hand”. General Stanley McChrystal told the *Wall Street Journal* the insurgents were moving beyond their strongholds in the south to threaten formerly “stable” areas in the north and west.

The Obama administration has already ordered an additional 21,000 American troops to Afghanistan to suppress the Taliban resistance, boosting the total US and NATO strength in the country to close to 100,000. Washington is nevertheless seeking extra forces from its European and other allies such as Australia and New Zealand.

Since a meeting in April between Foreign Minister Murray McCully and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the US has been putting pressure on the Key government to contribute more to the Afghan war—specifically by sending its crack combat unit.

The new US ambassador to NATO, Ivo Daalder, told the

New Zealand Herald on July 27 that New Zealand, as a “partner and ally” of the US, should be fighting in Afghanistan. He made it clear that the primary reason for a resumed troop commitment was the maintenance of New Zealand’s close military relations with the US and other allies, particularly Australia.

Like Clarke before him, Key has attempted to portray his government’s down-payment for its alliance with the US as a response to the increased threat of “terrorism”. He asserted that New Zealanders abroad were “threatened by terrorist attacks” and if international forces did not stabilise Afghanistan, it would become “an ever bigger hotbed for global terrorism”. His announcement on Monday reiterated that the SAS was going to “stabilise the situation”.

Key’s propaganda has been echoed by the major newspapers, all of which have agitated for the SAS deployment and endorsed the government’s decision.

An editorial in the *New Zealand Herald* on July 21 declared: “Sending the SAS has nothing to do with currying favour with the White House. It is about the way Afghanistan provided a training ground for worldwide terrorism.” The *Herald* invoked the terrorist bombings last month in Jakarta as evidence “that every effort must be made to prevent that happening again”.

The *Dominion Post* also pointed to the recent bombings in Jakarta, in which a New Zealand businessman was killed, as evidence that “terrorism threatens the physical, as well as the economic wellbeing, of New Zealanders”. It claimed that Afghanistan presented the “biggest threat to global peace and security”.

Such claims are nonsense. After more than seven years of fighting, not even US generals like McChrystal pretend any longer that American troops are hunting Al Qaeda or seeking to disrupt international terrorist networks. They openly admit they are conducting a counter-insurgency war aimed at crushing the resistance among the Afghan people to the presence of foreign troops and the establishment of a US-backed puppet regime in Kabul. The war in Afghanistan is a neo-colonial venture being waged by US imperialism for its

geo-political interests in the resource-rich Central Asian region.

The New Zealand SAS is being dispatched to assist in a systematic and ruthless campaign to crush Afghan opposition to this agenda. Its primary function, in collaboration with its Australian counterpart, in counter-insurgency operations is the killing—i.e., cold-blooded execution—or capture of suspected insurgents. During its previous tours, working as part of a US-led Joint Special Operations Taskforce, the unit proved so valuable to US clandestine operations that it received a rare citation from the Bush administration.

The character of the SAS operations in Afghanistan continues to be shrouded in secrecy, but a glimpse into its activities was revealed in a 2007 report by the *New Zealand Herald*. It noted 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, fingerprinted and properly registered as required under international law, the “suspects” had their heads shaved, with no photos or ID taken, and handed over to US forces.

According to a report in the *Sunday Star Times* on August 2, international legal experts now say this incident broke the Geneva Convention and laws against torture. The detainees were transferred to the US-run Kandahar detention centre in southern Afghanistan, nicknamed by American troops as “Camp Slappy”. Prisoners detained there have described being severely beaten and tortured, and drenched with water and left to freeze outside in winter.

The Geneva Convention and the UN Convention against Torture prohibit signatories such as New Zealand from torturing, humiliating or degrading prisoners, and from transferring them to countries that do so. Investigations are currently underway in the US and other countries into the crimes committed in Afghanistan at the time the NZ SAS was operating in the country.

Top US international human rights lawyer Michael Ratner has stated that by failing to accurately document the names of transferred prisoners, New Zealand troops effectively became the enablers of abuse. As the Obama administration ratchets up the Afghan war, the SAS will be used to commit new and far greater crimes.

In an attempt to tap into widespread opposition in New Zealand to any involvement in the Afghan war, Labour Party leader Phil Goff questioned the deployment of the SAS. He declared that instead, New Zealand’s “emphasis should be on the PRT”, which he implied was performing a humanitarian role.

The Greens similarly criticised the SAS deployment on the basis that it could compromise the “legitimacy and the

effectiveness of the work done by our Defence Force Reconstruction Team”. According to the Greens, involvement in the United Nations-authorised “stabilisation and nation-building mission” was an entirely legitimate, and separate, activity from US combat operations in Afghanistan.

The New Zealand troops and police within the PRT are not, however, simply a benign “reconstruction” and “peacekeeping” force. In an operation earlier this month, for example, they assisted Afghan police in capturing an alleged “Taliban leader”. The *Dominion Post* reported on August 4 that Mullah Borhan, a former governor of Bamiyan province, was arrested in connection with an insurgent attack on the home of a district government official in Ghandak, about 25 kilometres from the NZ military base. The NZ Joint Forces commander boasted of the success of the operation, saying the captured leader had “been on our radar” for some time.

The purported differences of Labour and the Greens with the Key government are a transparent sham. It was the Labour government that sent the SAS troops to Afghanistan in the first place. And whether the current New Zealand government has troops in Afghanistan operating as part of a PRT or on SAS combat patrols, it is a participant in the criminal and illegal invasion and occupation of the impoverished country.

Behind the Key government’s decision lie NZ imperialism’s own financial and geo-political interests. It wants greater access to US markets and, along with the Australian ruling elite, needs Washington’s backing for its continuing campaign to establish its political and economic domination over the desperately poor island-states of the South Pacific in the face of growing Chinese influence in the region.

To achieve these ends, the New Zealand establishment is more than willing to dispatch the SAS to kill and be killed as it assists Washington in consolidating a client state in Central Asia.



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