

WikiLeaks cables reveal commercial motivations behind New Zealand troop deployment to Iraq

Tom Peters

22 December 2010

A secret cable sent from the US embassy in Wellington sheds new light on the decision by New Zealand's former Labour government of Prime Minister Helen Clark to deploy 61 army engineers to Iraq in 2003. The document, one of 1,490 sent from the embassy and being released by WikiLeaks, shows that the troops were sent in order to protect New Zealand dairy giant Fonterra's lucrative United Nations contract to supply Iraq.

Excerpts from the cable published in Monday's *Dominion Post* provide evidence of the mercenary character of New Zealand's support for the occupation. The document states that unnamed senior officials from New Zealand's Ministry of Defence secretly told the US embassy that "it was not until Finance Minister Michael Cullen pointed out in a... Cabinet meeting that New Zealand's absence from Iraq might cost NZ dairy conglomerate Fonterra the lucrative dairy supply contract it enjoyed under the United Nations Oil for Food program, that the prime minister found a face-saving compromise and sent combat engineers in a non-combat role to Basra, where they were embedded with British forces."

Another cable sent in 2005 confirmed that "[s]ending combat engineers to Iraq has enabled the giant New Zealand dairy exporter, Fonterra, to bid on lucrative Iraq-related contracts." Fonterra is New Zealand's largest company and controls about 30 percent of the world's dairy exports.

Current Labour leader Phil Goff has tried to limit the political fallout of the revelations by dismissing them as "ridiculous". He declared to the New Zealand Press Association on Tuesday: "We do not trade putting the lives of our military personnel at risk for commercial deals" and added that "Labour was opposed to the invasion of Iraq." He said the engineers were sent "when the UN Security Council provided a mandate for countries that were not part of the invasion to assist."

The Labour government of 1999-2008 had initially distanced itself from the US invasion of Iraq, in the face of widespread public opposition to its brutal and criminal character. But its

criticism of the invasion was entirely hypocritical. As soon as France and Germany gave their support to a United Nations amendment to allow "peacekeeping" operations in the occupied country, the Clark government followed suit and dispatched the troops. The government also sent an extra 100 soldiers to assist the occupation of Afghanistan. New Zealand's elite SAS soldiers had already been active in the 2001 invasion of that country.

While Clark declared that the UN resolution provided "cover" for sending troops to Iraq for "reconstruction" purposes, behind the government's about-face lay the strategic and economic interests of New Zealand's ruling elite. The decision followed weeks of escalating threats by US officials to withdraw from free trade talks with New Zealand. Moreover, notwithstanding its public criticisms of the war, the Labour government celebrated the US victory, with Clark asserting that a "stable" Middle East would be "good for a meat-producing nation like New Zealand". Before the war, Iraq had been a "good market" for New Zealand. In its aftermath, Clark predicted "a lot of foreign money going in to rebuild capacity", which could provide substantial opportunities for New Zealand business.

The *Dominion Post* noted that the 1500 "cables reveal an extraordinary level of access for US diplomats in New Zealand; there are repeated references... to comments and briefings by New Zealand officials and diplomats on discussions within the inner circle of government, and US embassy staff have access cards for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade."

The leaked cables show a steady increase in military and intelligence collaboration between the US and New Zealand over the past decade, which was for the most part kept secret by both the 1999-2008 Labour government and the current conservative National Party government.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used her visit to New Zealand last month to publicly announce the "normalisation" of

relations between the two countries, more than two decades after the US largely severed defence ties in reprisal for New Zealand's anti-nuclear legislation. Foreign Minister Murray McCully told the media that the new "strategic partnership" could lead to "full blown military exercises" between the two countries within a year.

But a US cable sent in January 2010 and obtained by the *Sunday Star-Times* states: "Our intelligence relationship [with New Zealand] was fully restored on August 29, 2009 (which should not be acknowledged in public)". Other cables show that in February 2008, the Clark government secretly accepted a US proposal for closer collaboration in eight key defence areas. National's Defence Minister Wayne Mapp confirmed on Sunday that these areas included North Korea, the war in Afghanistan, the ASEAN regional forum and NATO global partnership.

A cable dated March 2, 2007 noted that then Prime Minister Clark "is read into all major operations involving US intelligence". The document went on to praise Clark for addressing "targets of marginal benefit to New Zealand that could do her political harm if made public. Over the past year, she has supported increased counterterrorism cooperation with us."

In a cable dated February 25, 2008, then US Ambassador Bill McCormick summarised comments by John MacArthur, Deputy Secretary of New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, about the new defence agreement: "New Zealand is eager to avoid any publicity about this new approach, will only say anything under 'extreme duress,' and will coordinate closely with the U.S. side before saying anything." McCormick noted that "NZ domestic political sensitivities" made it necessary "to build patterns of operational cooperation out of public and political view."

In other words, both governments agreed that the nature of the defence collaboration should be kept secret because of the broad popular hostility toward the US-led neo-colonial wars.

Hardly any information has been made public about the operations of New Zealand's SAS troops in Afghanistan, despite the fact that they have been implicated in war crimes. In August, the *Sunday Star-Times* revealed that NZ soldiers had assisted Afghan forces in arresting suspected insurgents and handing them over to the notorious National Directorate of Security (NDS), which, according to Amnesty International, carries out the "systemic and routine torture of suspects".

A key aim of increased military cooperation between New Zealand and the US is the desire of both governments to counter the increasing influence of China in the South Pacific.

A cable sent in 2004 expressed concern that Clark was "flirting" with China and France in order to limit American influence in the Pacific. But a cable from February 28, 2006 reported that New Zealand Ministry of Defence officials were concerned about the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) aid to defence forces in Fiji, Tonga and Papua New Guinea, and "PLA links to paramilitary forces in Vanuatu". Senior Defence official Chris Seed "said PLA activities in the Pacific Islands pose real security problems for New Zealand".

Another cable reported on a conversation in April 2008 between US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Christensen and New Zealand Foreign Affairs Deputy Secretary John McArthur. It noted that "Christensen confirmed that the US Government views with seriousness China's military build-up." The cable also noted that "McArthur said that China has been courting New Zealand in its military relations, offering language training for New Zealand defence attaches, contacts at the ministerial level, and exchange of ship visits." McArthur reportedly explained that New Zealand recognised "China's size but also... the potential for Chinese behaviour to 'become ugly.'"

The WikiLeaks cables illustrate the deeply anti-democratic nature of diplomacy between the US and New Zealand. They also highlight the potentially explosive tensions that have built up in the Pacific region between the US and its allies, and China. The corporate media, however, has sought to downplay their significance. *The New Zealand Herald* editorial yesterday asserted that there was nothing damaging in the cables to either the current National government or the previous Labour government. The paper praised the Clark Cabinet's "consideration of Fonterra's interest in Iraq", describing it as "sensible, practical diplomacy". The editors were unconcerned that the reasons for New Zealand's involvement in the Iraq war were kept secret and applauded "the fact that the US quietly restored military co-operation" from 2007.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact