

New Zealand SAS troops implicated in Afghan war crimes

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New evidence has emerged that New Zealand's Special Air Service (SAS) troops detained prisoners during operations in Afghanistan and then handed them over to US and Afghan forces who tortured them. An investigation published in the May issue of *Metro* magazine provided damning evidence that the elite force is complicit in human rights abuses, with successive New Zealand governments covering them up.

Among those implicated is former Chief of Defence Force (NZDF) Jerry Mateparae, who was recently appointed by the conservative National government as the country's next Governor-General. He has consistently defended the activities and record of the SAS and blocked *Metro's* Official Information Act requests for material. Mateparae assumes his new position, which includes the power to dismiss the government, in August.

New Zealand is a signatory to international conventions, including the Geneva Convention, against torture and inhumane or degrading treatment of prisoners. Its military cannot transfer prisoners unless they are satisfied they will not be tortured or treated inhumanely. The *Metro* investigation, by veteran journalist Jon Stephenson, uncovered details of three incidents—one in 2002 and two in 2010—when the SAS defied these rules.

In May 2002, the SAS led a mission in the village of Bande Timur, 80 kilometres west of Kandahar. According to *Metro*, it resulted in the deaths of at least three people, all civilians, and the detention of 55 others. The detainees were transferred to US custody, severely mistreated and, in some cases, tortured.

"They beat us very badly in prison", one of the prisoners, Abdul Wahid, told Stephenson. "They cut off our hair, and they shaved our beards and moustaches."

Others said they were bound and hooded, threatened with dogs and paraded naked in front of Americans. One man was said to have been beaten so severely that he ended up disabled and in a wheelchair. The men were later released without charge.

The raid was justified on the grounds that the SAS was looking for a "high value target" in the Taliban leadership. The US intelligence proved to be wrong. While not identifying the involvement of New Zealand troops, a 2004 Human Rights Watch report entitled "Enduring Freedom: Abuses by US forces in Afghanistan" cited the incident as an example in which the US and its allies had endangered the lives of Afghan civilians.

Metro also detailed two incidents last year. An SAS prisoner was handed to the Afghan National Army, who intended to tie the man to a vehicle and drag him for over 100 kilometres of gravel road. The SAS intervened and handed the prisoner to the Afghan Crisis Response Unit (CRU), who then passed him to the Afghan secret police, the notorious National Directorate of Security (NDS). A British court has banned British forces from giving prisoners to the NDS following evidence that hundreds of detainees transferred to its custody were tortured. Allegations included the amputation of limbs, electric shocks, deprivation of sleep, water and food, beatings by rod and cable, scorching and killings.

In an incident on Christmas Eve, an SAS raid on the Kabul head office of equipment supply company Tiger International resulted in the killing of two security guards. Several Tiger employees were taken prisoner and handed over to the NDS. The prisoners were recognised by the NDS and released. In the wake of the raid, the Afghan government criticised the unit for exceeding its mandate—operations in Kabul are

supposed to be led by Afghan troops—and SAS operations were halted while the incident was reviewed. A report released by the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force and the NZDF exonerated the soldiers, claiming they had fired in self-defence.

Political leaders from both National and Labour have maintained a shroud of secrecy over the activities of the SAS. Prime Minister John Key claimed last August that when the unit handed a detainee to other units, they made sure that person would not be tortured.

According to *Metro*, “the opposite is true”. It quoted a senior Afghan special forces officer who claimed that the SAS was “very, very involved” in handing over prisoners in conditions where NZ forces could not possibly be satisfied they would be treated humanely. One SAS trooper told Stephenson they always knew what would happen when prisoners were handed to US forces. He said he had personally witnessed head-shaven prisoners in jumpsuits in their custody. “It looked like Guantanamo Bay”, he noted.

The *Metro* revelations are not the first questions raised over SAS activities. Last month, it was revealed that the SAS had taken part in a secret mission to kill the alleged Taliban “insurgents” responsible for the first combat death of a New Zealand soldier in Afghanistan last August.

A NATO-led operation involving the SAS took place two weeks later. A Baghlan district governor claimed there were eight civilian casualties. A NATO investigation later claimed that a malfunctioning helicopter gunsight had resulted in errant fire. The NZ government kept the raid secret for nine months. When Defence Minister Wayne Mapp finally spoke, he denied it had been a “revenge” mission or that any civilians were killed.

The thrust of the *Metro* article was that the SAS troops have been unwilling participants in war crimes. However, the character of their operations is determined by the predatory and illegal nature of the occupation in Afghanistan.

The US and its NATO-led allies 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 SAS, a specialist troop of highly-trained killers, has been dispatched to assist in the campaign to crush Afghan opposition to the occupation. Its primary function in counter-insurgency operations is the 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 that it received a rare citation from the Bush administration.

This was underscored in January when the unit’s commander, Lieutenant Colonel Chris Parsons, was awarded the United States’ highest decoration for foreign officers, the Defense Meritorious Service medal.

The government and armed forces have closed ranks over the *Metro* allegations. A Defence Force spokesman claimed the incidents described in the article were either inaccurate or did not happen. Key attacked Stephenson personally, saying he was “not credible”. The journalist countered by challenging the Defence Force to face an independent inquiry, saying that it would “show they are the ones misleading the public”.

Labour and the Greens have backed an inquiry and called for the SAS to be withdrawn from Afghanistan. Both parties, however, support the continued presence of so-called Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) troops in Afghanistan. The PRT, based in Bamiyan province, is just as much a part of the US-led war as the SAS. Its purpose is to try to bolster support for the Karzai puppet government and the presence of foreign troops.

The purported differences of Labour and the Greens with the Key government are a sham. It was a Labour government—supported by its coalition partner, the “left-wing” Alliance—that sent the SAS to Afghanistan in the first place. 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 illegal occupation of the impoverished country.



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