Secret Australian SAS operations in Africa

James Cogan
14 March 2012

The Melbourne *Age* published allegations on Monday that a secret unit of the Australian military's elite Special Air Service (SAS) had been deployed on "dozens" of illegal spying operations inside a number of African countries over the past year. The missions, including in Zimbabwe, Kenya and Nigeria, had been "assessing border controls, exploring landing sites for possible military interventions and possible escape routes for the evacuation of Australian nationals and military assessments of local politics and security."

The newspaper reported that the information was leaked due to concerns within the military hierarchy that out-of-uniform SAS troops captured on such missions would not have the legal protections of conventional spies employed by a civilian intelligence agency. According to the *Age* sources, one SAS trooper asked government officials: "What happens if we get caught?"

Australia is not at war with any African country and, at least in the case of Zimbabwe, no authorisation has been given for the Australian military to operate within its borders. The SAS presence in any state under such conditions is tantamount to an act of war. It would be in violation of the United Nations charter and illegal under international law.

The leak follows a little-reported incident in late January when an Australian couple was detained in Zimbabwe after mistakenly driving into a convoy transporting Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe. During an ordeal lasting over an hour, they were told they would be charged with attempting to assassinate Mugabe, before being released and allowed to fly out of the country. A Zimbabwean news portal, *zimeye.org*, commented yesterday following the *Age* report: "Although the charges were unproven, it would suggest a level of heightened awareness in Zimbabwe's intelligence community about the presence of Australian mercenaries on Zimbabwean soil."

The revelations also come in the wake of a failed attempt by the British Special Boat Squad (SBS) to rescue two hostages—one British and one Italian—being held allegedly for ransom by an Islamic extremist group in Nigeria. The SBS personnel had entered Nigeria posing as civilians and their weapons were clandestinely sent into the country through protected diplomatic channels. Their raid ended in disaster. Instead of a rapid surprise attack, a two-hour firefight ensued, during which both hostages were reportedly murdered by their captors.

The British special forces were in Nigeria with the knowledge and cooperation of the Nigerian government. If they had not been, a confrontation could have developed with the local security forces.

The *Age* sources stated that the secret SAS unit, known as 4 Squadron, was established in 2005 by the former Liberal government of John Howard. They suggested that it was an attempt to circumvent legal prohibitions on the Australian Secret Intelligence Agency (ASIS) conducting missions overseas or within Australia that involved aggressive force.

The *Age* implied that 4 Squadron was created to contribute to the growing activities of the US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) that combine intelligence and special forces units. The US military has relied increasingly on such operations to suppress the popular resistance to the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The SAS squadron is based on Swan Island, near

Melbourne, to which access is highly restricted. Its formation coincided with the re-deployment of the SAS in late 2005 to fight the anti-occupation forces in Afghanistan operating from bases across the border in Pakistan's tribal agencies. Reports in the US media have alleged that JSOC forces have conducted illegal assassinations and kidnappings inside Pakistan.

The *Age* indicated that the 4 Squadron deployments to Africa began in late 2010 or early 2011 on the authorisation of the current Defence Minister Stephen Smith. The sources claimed that Smith had declined a request by Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd that 4 Squadron be sent illegally into Libya in early 2011, to take part in the NATO operations against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. At that time, JSOC forces were also conducting operations inside Yemen and Somalia to identify alleged Islamists for assassination by aerial drone missile attacks.

The reports raise questions as whether Australian forces have also been used illegally in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. As for SAS activities inside Kenya and Nigeria—two countries where Islamists are also being targeted—they would almost certainly have been conducted in joint operations with US and British forces. The *Age* sources said the intelligence gathered by 4 Squadron "all flows into databases used by the United States and its allies in Africa."

Other questions arise from the alleged SAS deployments in Zimbabwe, where there are no Islamist movements. The only purpose of Australian spying inside Zimbabwe over the past year would be to contribute to international planning for a move against the Mugabe regime. Alongside Britain, Australia has been in the forefront of efforts to demonise and isolate Mugabe paving the way for his replacement or overthrow.

Responding to media questions, Defence Minister Smith refused to confirm or deny that 4 Squadron existed, or that SAS troops were in Africa. He stated instead that any deployment would be "in accordance with our domestic law". Asked on Sky News whether SAS troops were carrying out espionage without legal cover, he answered: "That's a very good question and it allows me to make this point, that whenever we have our people in the field, they have the proper and appropriate protections."

The revelations published thus far by the *Age* indicate that the Gillard government has embroiled Australia in international military actions and intrigue that go beyond anything initiated by the previous Howard government. These operations are being conducted behind the backs of the population and in contempt of international law.