

Australian government confirms commitment to ongoing Afghanistan occupation

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At the May 20-21 NATO summit in Chicago, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard pledged further support for the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. She stressed that the planned drawdown of more than 1,500 Australian troops in the southern Uruzgan province was in line with the Obama administration's "transition", which aims to withdraw combat forces in 2014 while maintaining a substantial military presence until 2024 and beyond.

Gillard functioned as little more than a mouthpiece for Washington during the NATO discussions. The Obama administration had aimed to use the summit to drum up financial support for the massive Afghan military-security apparatus developed under the US-NATO occupation. There will soon be 350,000 soldiers enrolled in the Afghan National Army, and the national police is expected to number another 160,000 by 2014, costing an estimated \$4.1 billion annually.

Before leaving for Chicago, Gillard announced that Australia would contribute \$100 million a year for three years. She declared that one of her key objectives in the NATO summit was to "see appropriate decisions made to sustain the Afghan National Security Forces beyond 2014", adding that Australia "will be urging other nations to play their part in providing that support."

Like an enthusiastic mafia bagman, Gillard organised meetings with the leaders of France, Germany, Britain, Holland, and Slovenia to demand more money for the US-led neo-colonial occupation. She also met with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, adding her voice to US demands that a key supply route from the Pakistani port of Karachi to the Afghan border be

reopened.

The prime minister's efforts produced few results, however, with one media report noting: "Australia's \$300 million commitment to Afghanistan's defence forces is beginning to look spectacularly generous, as far larger key NATO allies leave the Chicago summit having made smaller pledges, or none at all."

Ever since she took office in June 2010, Gillard has stressed her unconditional support for the indefinite occupation of Afghanistan.

Last month she announced that most Australian forces in the country—the largest non-NATO force involved in the occupation—would be withdrawn within 12 to 18 months, earlier than the previously anticipated December 2014 deadline. Foreign Minister Bob Carr has since complained that sections of the media had "confused transition with withdrawal—there has been no change in the Australian position." In Chicago, Gillard said that in addition to the \$300 million in funding, Australian forces would "help train and mentor the Afghan National Army and police" beyond 2014.

Moreover, the Labor government is seeking to arrange a continued presence of Australian Special Air Service (SAS) forces, for "counterterrorist" operations—in line with US plans for a continuing military presence beyond 2014. These elite Australian troops have played an important role, working with US special forces to assassinate Afghans identified as opponents of the occupation.

The Labor government's commitment to indefinite war in Afghanistan flies in the face of the

overwhelming opposition among ordinary people in Australia.

During the NATO summit Gillard reprised the “war on terror” rationale for the continued military operations. In reality, US imperialism is motivated by the drive to bolster its geostrategic domination of Afghanistan and the wider, energy-rich Central Asian region. The September 11 terrorist attacks provided a welcome pretext for the pre-prepared invasion of a country that borders both Iran and China. For the Australian ruling elite, the war provided another opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to the US alliance and to secure Washington’s support for its own predatory operations, especially in the South Pacific.

Important economic interests are also at stake in Afghanistan. The country’s untapped mineral wealth, estimated to be worth as much as \$3 trillion, includes iron ore, copper, gold, and rare earths. Australian mining companies are among those scrambling for a cut of the enormous profits at stake. In December last year, Afghanistan’s ambassador to Australia Nasir Andisha said that he planned to organise meetings with mining executives, to see “if there is a possibility of getting major companies interested”, including BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto.

Afghan Mines Minister Wahidullah Shahrani told the *Australian* last month that the Gillard government “has been very generous to help us with our technical capacity, give us scholarships for postgraduate programs in the mining area and we’ve also been sending some people to the Australian department of mines and petroleum.” An Afghan Ministry of Mines delegation is due to soon visit Australia, to “convince Australian mining companies that the opportunities for mineral exploitation outweigh the security risks.”

Last Sunday, Gillard met Afghan President Hamid Karzai and signed a “Comprehensive Long-Term Partnership” agreement. Part of the text stated that the two governments “will cooperate to build Afghanistan’s capacity to develop and sustainably manage its natural resources.”

The sordid manoeuvres of the Labor government on

behalf of the mining giants underscore the filthy character of the entire US-led operation in Afghanistan.



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