

Three New Zealand soldiers killed in Afghanistan

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Three New Zealand soldiers were killed in Afghanistan on August 19 when their Humvee, the last in a convoy of four vehicles, was blown up by a roadside improvised explosive device (IED). They were Corporal Luke Tamatea, 31, a father of four, medic Lance Corporal Jacinda Baker, the first female NZ soldier killed in a combat role, and Richard Harris, aged 21.

The attack occurred just two weeks after the deaths of two other NZ soldiers in the same area of northern Bamiyan province. On August 4, Lance Corporals Pralli Durrer and Rory Malone were killed, and six soldiers seriously injured, when members of the NZ Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) were attacked by insurgents armed with anti-tank weapons, rifles and machine guns. The total death and injury toll for the month of August is the NZ military's worst since November 1951, during the Korean War.

The 140-strong PRT was sent to Bamiyan in 2003 by the previous Labour government following the dispatch of the elite SAS combat unit. According to the government, the PRT is a "peacekeeping" unit carrying out "reconstruction" tasks, such as building schools and hospitals. In reality, the brutal neo-colonial war is aimed at transforming Afghanistan into a base for US economic and strategic dominance over the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. All aspects of the occupation are aimed at ending popular resistance and entrenching the corrupt US-backed regime of President Hamid Karzai.

Despite claims by successive governments and the media that Bamiyan is relatively quiescent and the local population welcomes the activities of the PRT unit, local Afghan officials recently issued contrary warnings. "These provinces are unsafe and we have big concerns about the future," police chief Jumma Guldi

Yaardam told the *Guardian* newspaper.

According to a report in the *Herald on Sunday* on August 26, the Taliban, which claimed responsibility for both attacks, has begun targeting NZ troops. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Radio New Zealand: "New Zealand has not sent us workers or engineers. They have sent their soldiers to us. The soldiers don't do the work of aid or assistance. The soldiers come for secret purposes and they carry guns. They have military equipment and they have entered our country illegitimately, illegally as an invading force."

The attacks further expose the deteriorating military situation in the face of ongoing Afghan resistance. During August the US military death toll reached 2,000 for the nearly 11-year-old conflict. Nearly nine years elapsed before American forces reached their first 1,000 dead. The second 1,000 came just 27 months later.

The recent fatalities—which have brought the NZ death toll in Afghanistan to 10—triggered a shift in the position of the ruling elite. The PRT is now to be brought home in April, earlier than the original September 2013 date. Prime Minister John Key insisted that New Zealand was not "cutting and running", but meeting the logistical requirements of an "orderly" withdrawal.

Most media commentary fell into line. The *Dominion Post*'s editorial of August 7, written after the first ambush, insisted that NZ should "stay the course" and resist the temptation to withdraw ahead of schedule. By August 22 however, the *Dominion* had turned 180 degrees, intoning that, "whatever the reason," the government's decision to advance the withdrawal was "a welcome signal".

The NZ ruling elites seem intent on washing its hands

of the criminal enterprise by declaring the Afghan war “unwinnable”. *New Zealand Herald* columnist Brian Rudman wrote: “New Zealanders are part of a front line in a war that all are agreed we can’t win.” Fellow *Herald* columnist Paul Thomas contemptuously declared: “whichever way you look at it, it’s hard to see why that godforsaken country is worth the life of a single young New Zealander, let alone 10.”

Such arguments seek to cover up the fact that from the beginning New Zealand has been a participant in the US-led invasion and campaign of terror against the impoverished Afghan people, tens of thousands of whom have been killed. New Zealand’s military involvement, including four tours of duty by the SAS, was calculated to rebuild defence ties with the US to ensure its backing for the NZ corporate elite’s own strategic interests especially in the Pacific. That has now been achieved with the new defence pacts recently signed with NATO and Washington.

The opposition Labour Party and the Greens have played a crucial role throughout. The previous Labour government, supported by the Alliance, decided in 2001 to dispatch SAS troops, followed by the PRT, under the rubric of the “war on terror”. Both parties, while now calling for an exit, have consistently endorsed the presence of the PRT, claiming it was in Afghanistan for the “right reasons”.

Speaking at Victoria University last week, Labour’s former defence minister Phil Goff boasted that the PRT “has been regarded by other countries and allied forces as a model” in “helping create stability and the opportunity for development”. Yet, he said it was now time to leave because NZ was propping up the Karzai administration which, “mired in corruption and tainted by the involvement of warlords and drug traffickers,” had “failed to win the support of the people.” In fact, the Karzai administration was never anything other than a puppet of the major imperialist powers.

Likewise, the Greens depict the PRT as a “non-military solution to Afghanistan’s problems”. Foreign affairs spokesman Kennedy Graham said the party supported “reconstruction work” but the escalation of hostilities in the region had seen troops increasingly used to monitor and defuse tensions. “The rationale, which we originally supported, appears to have eroded to the point where there is no sound reason for them to be there,” Graham said.

New Zealand governments have constantly sought to defuse widespread antiwar sentiment by cloaking the military operations in Afghanistan as “peacekeeping”. Nevertheless, a May 2010 opinion poll found that an overwhelming number of respondents—77 percent—favoured some form of withdrawal of NZ troops. Only 10 percent wanted all troops to remain.



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