

Australian soldier dies in Afghanistan

Mark Church
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On June 22, long-serving commando Corporal Cameron Stewart Barid was killed when Afghan villagers in the Khod Valley region of Oruzgan province opened fire to defend their village from a morning raid by an Australian army unit. Another unnamed commando was seriously wounded and one airman was injured.

News of the 40th Australian soldier's death in Afghanistan has been exploited by political figures, seeking to mask over the neo-colonial nature of the decade-long US-led occupation of the country.

In one of her last formal public appearances before being ousted as Labor Party leader and prime minister, Julia Gillard said "every death, every loss" hit the "nation hard." She recycled the lies used to justify the discredited "war on terror", saying the death served to end public complacency and was a reminder "that the danger isn't gone."

In fact, the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan had nothing to do with protecting ordinary people from terrorism. The "war on terror" sought to establish US hegemony over the strategically important and energy-rich Central Asian region. For the past decade, Washington and its allies have propped up the corrupt and increasingly despised puppet government of Hamid Karzai.

In Oruzgan province, as part of this effort, Australian forces have supported the local warlord, Matiullah Khan, who has a record of extortion and the killing of political rivals.

Defence Minister Stephen Smith made clear that the latest death would not alter the plans for a continued Australia military presence in Afghanistan, well beyond the mooted 2014 date for a US handover to Afghan government forces. "It's in our national interest to continue," he said. "We'll then need to see what arrangements are entered into between the United States and Afghanistan before making a judgment about what additional contribution, if any, we could make after all of Afghanistan transitions at the end of 2014."

As soon as Gillard was installed as prime minister in the mid-2010 backroom coup against Kevin Rudd, she

reiterated the Labor government's support for the US-led occupation and indicated that Australian troops could remain in Afghanistan for another decade. Now that Rudd has been re-installed, there is no suggestion by his government of any shift. While other Australian forces will leave by the end of 2014, the government has offered to keep Special Forces contingents, featuring the Special Air Service (SAS), deployed beyond that date, perhaps indefinitely.

After nearly 12 years of fighting the Taliban, Washington is currently attempting to negotiate with the Islamists, with or without Karzai's participation, in order to try to establish a new more stable and pliable government and ensure the continued US use of military and air bases in Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan war has claimed the most Australian lives since the Vietnam War, in which Canberra also supported a US invasion. Most deaths have come from the Special Forces Task Group, which co-ordinates the commandos and SAS.

Cameron Baird's death underscores the central role of a hardened core of SAS and commando unit soldiers in Australia's involvement in the war and other neo-colonial interventions over the past 15 years. A member of the Sydney-based 2nd commando regiment, he was on his fifth tour of duty in Afghanistan. He also served in East Timor and Iraq.

Alongside the SAS, which conducts infiltration and targeted killings, the commandos carry out more overt actions such as assaults on suspected villages or combat patrols. They have formed the front line in Australia's presence in Afghanistan. According to Defence Forces chief General David Hurley, commandos were conducting such an operation, "disrupting" an insurgent network in a rural village, when Baird was killed.

The Australian Special Forces have reportedly become highly prized by the American command for their effectiveness and ruthlessness in suppressing resistance to the US occupation. In a number of documented cases, Australian commandos have been involved in the killing

of civilians.

In March, an Australian Special Forces Task Group patrol reportedly shot two boys aged seven and eight tending livestock. The story was later changed a few days later to claim that an American helicopter called in by the Australian soldiers killed the boys.

Last September, Australian soldiers launched a reprisal for the killing of three soldiers by an Afghani trainee in a “green on blue” attack. They rounded up residents of the village of Sola and arrested them before killing a 70-year-old Iman and his 30-year-old son. The incident fueled public outrage in Afghanistan about the Australian presence.

In 2009, Australian commandos participated in a raid on an Afghan village, allegedly to capture or kill a Taliban commander, which resulted in the deaths of five children. Five soldiers were eventually charged with manslaughter, but these charges were dropped in 2011, effectively giving a green light for further crimes.

The current withdrawal of most foreign forces is in large part the result of the widespread popular opposition and resistance to the neo-colonial occupation. Nevertheless, Australian Special Forces will be kept in the country to help maintain the American foothold, in return for US political and military support elsewhere.

There can be no doubt that the continuing presence of US and allied soldiers in Afghanistan will lead to more deaths of soldiers, as well as many civilians, and the further ruin of the already impoverished country.

The author also recommends:

Australian soldiers launch reprisal over “green on blue” incident

[4 September 2012]

Charges dropped against Australian soldiers over Afghan civilian killings

[26 May 2011]



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