New Zealand shared intelligence with Bangladesh's repressive agencies

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Leaked documents show that New Zealand's intelligence agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB), has spent more than a decade collaborating with the US National Security Agency (NSA) to spy on targets in Bangladesh. The agencies passed on information to Bangladeshi security agencies, which are notorious for torture, murder and "disappearances."

The secret NSA documents are the latest released by whistleblower Edward Snowden about the GCSB's activities. The revelations were published on April 16 in the *New Zealand Herald* by journalists Nicky Hager and David Fisher, in collaboration with Ryan Gallagher from the US web site, the *Intercept*. Previous reports have exposed the agency's mass surveillance of New Zealanders and Pacific Islanders, direct surveillance of the Solomon Islands government, and spying on Afghanistan, Iran, China and other Asian countries.

The GCSB shares information with its partners in the Five Eyes alliance: the NSA and the intelligence agencies of Britain, Canada and Australia. In return, the GCSB has access to the NSA's powerful spy tools such as XKeyscore, which allows the agency to search through millions of private emails, internet data and phone calls. The New Zealand ruling elite uses mass surveillance to maintain its neo-colonial sphere of influence in the south-west Pacific and to advance its interests internationally, as an ally of US imperialism.

As with previous revelations, Prime Minister John Key has refused to comment on the GCSB's operations in Bangladesh, telling Radio NZ that "they act lawfully... they gather information for reasons of national interest to New Zealand, and that's really about all I'm prepared to say." In fact, the leaks demolish claims that the GCSB's activities are lawful and focused on countering threats to New Zealand.

A NSA document from April 2013 stated that "GCSB has been the lead for the intelligence community on the Bangladesh CT [Counter-Terrorism] target since 2004." It added that the GCSB "provided unique intelligence leads that have enabled successful CT operations by Bangladesh State Intelligence Service, CIA and India over the past year."

Another document written in 2004 reveals that in December 2003 the GCSB was "contributing to the War on Terrorism by reporting on the activities of Islamic extremists in Asia and the Pacific region and specifically taking on Bangladesh and Burma."

The *Herald* noted that the three Bangladeshi intelligence agencies—the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, the National Security Intelligence agency, and the police Special Branch—as well as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), which carries out "counter-terrorism" operations, "have been accused of involvement in severe human rights abuses over a sustained number of years."

The agencies "work together as part of a notorious centre called the Taskforce for Interrogation Cell, located inside a compound in northern Dhaka that is controlled by the RAB." A Human Rights Watch report quoted by the newspaper lists the methods of torture used there, including "burning with acid, hammering of nails into toes ... electric shocks, beatings on legs with iron rods, beating with batons on backs after sprinkling sand on them, ice torture, finger piercing, and mock executions."

The RAB has been responsible for the disappearance and murder of hundreds of opposition politicians, trade unionists and Islamists. US embassy cables released by WikiLeaks in 2011 showed that British police provided training for the RAB death squads.

The reign of terror is aimed primarily against the

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Bangladeshi working class, a source of cheap labour that is exploited by the world's capitalist powers. The vast majority of the population lives and works in appalling and dangerous conditions. The RAB and other paramilitary police units regularly use physical violence against protests and strikes by workers.

The NSA documents indicate that successive New Zealand governments—beginning with the 1999–2008 Labour government of Prime Minister Helen Clark—have been complicit in the repression by Bangladeshi security forces. The GCSB's operations were carried out entirely behind the backs and without the consent of the New Zealand population.

After retiring from politics, Clark visited Bangladesh in November 2010, in her current role as United Nations Development Program administrator, to participate in a forum hosted by the country's Human Rights Commission. In a speech, she praised Bangladesh's supposed "progress" toward "poverty reduction based on participatory and inclusive strategies and democratic governance." She did not mention, of course, her government's support for the state's torturers and murderers.

Spying in Bangladesh was part of the Labour government's strengthening of intelligence and military alliance with Washington. It sent troops to both Afghanistan and Iraq and deployed GCSB agents to help in targeting air strikes in Afghanistan. The so-called "left wing" Alliance Party and the Greens supported Labour's decision to join the war in Afghanistan.

According to the *Herald*, current Labour leader Andrew Little "said he was not concerned about the GCSB's work in Bangladesh but would be if intelligence material was 'being used to deal with people in a barbaric, extra-judicial way.'"

In reality, extra-judicial and barbaric methods are routine in Bangladesh. Amnesty International's New Zealand executive director Grant Bayldon told Radio NZ: "There's an extremely high risk that surveillance handed over to the Bangladeshi security forces by the New Zealand Government could result in... very grave human rights abuses."

The Snowden documents mention that, in addition to sharing information with Bangladeshi agencies, the GCSB secretly monitored the RAB itself. A 2009 GCSB report stated that this intelligence "could well be of high interest for future operations if the domestic security situation in Bangladesh were to deteriorate."

The US and its allies, including New Zealand, do not oppose the RAB's human rights abuses. Rather, they are gathering information to use against Dhaka in the event that it chooses to pursue stronger diplomatic and military ties with China, which is Bangladesh's biggest trading partner. In the event of any shift towards Beijing, the Bangladeshi government could suddenly find itself the target of US-led "human rights" campaign aimed at pressuring into line with Washington.

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