

# Australian troops sent to the Philippines despite end of Marawi siege

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As war tensions mount in Asia, driven by Washington's confrontation with North Korea and its ally China, the Australian government is yet again sending forces into a sensitive strategic zone to support US-led military operations.

Defence Minister Marise Payne on Monday announced that 80 Australian troops would soon be dispatched to the Philippines, ostensibly to train its army in "urban warfare"—skills that the Australian military has acquired in Afghanistan and Iraq over the past 16 years. In what has become the norm since the invasions of those two countries, another far-reaching military commitment has been made without any parliamentary debate, let alone any approval by the Australian population.

Payne confirmed the deployment at an annual Southeast Asian defence ministers' meeting with her Asian, US and other imperialist counterparts, held at the former US Clark Air Force Base north of Manila. Her announcement came some two months after Canberra first publicly "offered" to send troops to the Philippines.

When Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop initially revealed the offer in August, she claimed that Australian troops could assist the fight against alleged Islamic State (IS)-linked forces in Marawi City on the southern island of Mindanao.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull insisted the insurgency was "a real threat" to Australia. "We do not want Marawi to become the Raqqa of southeast Asia," he asserted.

Now, however, the deployment is going ahead despite the Philippines government of President Rodrigo Duterte this week declaring it had won the Marawi battle.

In reality, Canberra made a US-backed "offer" that

the Philippines government could not refuse. US troops are also in the Philippines under the guise of fighting "IS terrorists."

Washington and the Philippines military seized upon the Marawi conflict, which began as a battle between rival armed gangs, to effectively stand over Duterte, who showed signs of tilting Manila's foreign policy toward China, from where he hoped to secure investment and aid.

In return for Duterte's compliance with the US intervention, the Trump administration and its partners have deflected criticism of his regime's fascistic activities, in which police and vigilantes have killed thousands of people in poor urban areas via a "war on drugs."

On Monday, Payne gave a joint media conference with Philippine Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana. Payne said: "The ADF [Australian Defence Force] will provide mobile training teams that will begin providing urban warfare counter-terrorism training in the Philippines in the coming days."

Payne provided no detail on where the "mobile" teams would operate, only saying the training would be "conducted on Philippines military bases."

Australia and the US are the only two countries to have Status of Visiting Forces defence agreements with the Philippines, providing access to bases and a legal framework for "enhanced military cooperation."

In a media statement, Payne indicated that the troop commitment was part of a wider partnership. "As part of the increased cooperation, Australia and the Philippines defence forces will also work together to enhance intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance in the southern Philippines; strengthen information sharing arrangements; and enhance maritime security engagement and bilateral maritime patrols."

No specifics were provided about the maritime patrols. They could well include “freedom of navigation” exercises to challenge Chinese activities on the islets it controls in the strategic South China Sea; where the Philippines also has territorial claims. Since taking office last year, Duterte has declined to pursue a confrontation with China over the issue, despite his predecessor, Benigno Aquino, taking a US-backed case to an international tribunal to contest China’s territorial claims.

Lorenzana, who is regarded as being closer to the US-aligned Philippines military than Duterte, thanked Australia for its contribution to the Marawi siege, which included two AP-3C Orion military spy planes and intelligence sharing. “From the start, Australia has been providing invaluable support,” he said.

Previously, Payne revealed that Australian troops were already on the ground in the Philippines. “We have increased our engagement—a surge if you like—in the context of the current events,” she said in Manila on September 8 during an earlier media event with Lorenzana.

It remains unclear how long the soldiers have been there, undoubtedly working closely with US forces, whose presence in Mindanao was acknowledged by the US embassy on June 9.

Unanswered questions also still exist about a brazen display of support for Duterte by the director-general of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), Nick Warner, in Manila on August 22.

Australia’s top foreign spy official met with Duterte and Lorenzana at the presidential palace. The president’s office released photos of Warner and Duterte grinning and using Duterte’s signature closed-fist hand gesture, a symbol of his 2016 presidential campaign pledge to kill thousands of “criminals.”

ASIS is Australia’s equivalent of the US CIA. The presence of its chief, who was also involved in interventions in Iraq and Solomon Islands, and previously headed Australia’s Defence Department, was a revealing sign of Canberra’s active intelligence and military involvement in the Philippines.

The Philippines deployment is part of Australia’s escalating involvement in aggressive US military operations globally. In May, the Turnbull government added 30 troops to the Australian contingent in Afghanistan, increasing it to 300. In both Afghanistan

and Iraq, the Australian military is supposedly providing similar training as it now will in the Philippines.

Behind the back of the Australian population, special forces personnel may also be participating secretly in other US-led operations. The winter edition of the *Australian & NZ Defender Magazine* has an article on US military operations in the west African country of Niger. It features photo coverage of Australian special forces there, along with US, Canadian and Belgian commandos. The Australians are reported to be involved in “ambush drills, ambush establishment and emergency medical response.”

The five-month siege of Marawi, which has left much of the city in ruins, particularly the eastern half, has provided an idea of the brutal kind of “training” being provided by US and Australian personnel in the Philippines.

Air strikes and thousands of government troops inflicted a savage enormous toll on the city’s population, killing more than 1,000 people and damaging or destroying hundreds of houses, mosques and other buildings. About 400,000 residents were forced to flee their homes.

This week, US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis praised Filipino soldiers, declaring they had defeated the insurgents without attracting allegations of human rights violations. Mattis said the United States provided critical tactical intelligence in the Marawi operation, deploying surveillance planes and drones, thermal imaging and eavesdropping equipment.



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