

New Zealand government launches sham inquiry into Afghan war crimes

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New Zealand's Labour-NZ First-Green Party government recently announced a formal investigation into war crimes allegedly committed by NZ Defence Force (NZDF) troops in Afghanistan in 2010.

In March last year, Nicky Hager and Jon Stephenson's book *Hit and Run: The New Zealand SAS in Afghanistan and the meaning of honour*, published details of a mission called Operation Burnham. It reported that during the operation, Special Air Services (SAS) troops killed six civilians, including a three-year-old girl, and injured a further 15 civilians.

The previous National Party government sought to cover up New Zealand's involvement in the raid. Prime Minister John Key had earlier dismissed Hager as a "left-wing conspiracy theorist," while Chief of Defence Tim Keating claimed the book's allegations were false.

NZ SAS members are highly trained killers, receiving a rare unit citation from President George W. Bush in 2004. The SAS was first sent to Afghanistan in 2001 by the Labour Party government of 1999–2008, supported by its "left" coalition partner the Alliance.

The NZDF continues to deny that civilians were killed during Operation Burnham. Last August, however, Fairfax Media published a documentary series, *The Valley*, which revealed that the SAS routinely uses a tactic called "bait and hook," in which Afghan villagers are terrorised in order to provoke a fight.

A 2004 battle for which Corporal Willie Apiata received a Victoria Cross, the country's highest military honour, was a "bait and hook" operation, a fact suppressed throughout the subsequent glorification of the SAS and his role.

The Valley also shed light on the role of the so-called Provincial Reconstruction Team (NZPRT). Officially a "peacekeeping" force, it in fact gathered intelligence on

Afghan civilians and led offensive operations, including the botched Battle of Baghak in 2012, which resulted in the deaths of two New Zealanders and four Afghan Army soldiers.

The NZPRT was an integral part of the US occupation of the impoverished but strategically vital country in the oil and gas-rich region of the Middle East and Central Asia.

David Parker, Labour's attorney-general, announced the official inquiry into the *Hit and Run* allegations in April. He said it was necessary "for the public to have confidence in the NZDF." Parker said parts of the findings may not even be made public "given the classified nature of some of the information."

The purpose of the investigation is not to establish the truth but to whitewash the NZDF's war crimes and restore its tarnished reputation as it prepares to enter new wars to advance New Zealand's neo-colonial interests alongside the US.

A Strategic Defence Policy Statement, released last month by Defence Minister Ron Mark, demands stepped-up measures to protect "national security." It echoes the Trump administration's 2018 National Defence Strategy in addressing looming inter-imperialist conflicts and targeting China and Russia as the principal "threats" to the "international community."

Mark is an MP for the right-wing populist NZ First Party, a former soldier and ardent militarist. He served in the Sinai, completing two back-to-back tours in 1983, then joined the Sultan of Oman's Armed Forces from 1985 to 1990. Oman, a close ally of the US and the UK, is ruled by an unelected hereditary Sultan, who has brutally put down opposition movements.

The inquiry into the 2010 Afghanistan raid is far from "independent." It is led by former Supreme Court judge

Terence Arnold and ex-Labour Party Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer. In May, General Keating announced that an office for the inquiry had been established, led by former deputy navy chief Commodore Mathew Williams.

The inquiry's terms of reference are limited to determining whether the NZDF complied "with the applicable rules of engagement and international humanitarian law." It will determine if the "rules of engagement... changed over the course of the Afghanistan deployment" to justify the "offensive use of lethal force against specified individuals (other than in the course of direct battle)."

Inspector General of Intelligence and Security Cheryl Gwyn announced in June she would conduct her own investigation into New Zealand's possible involvement with the CIA's detention and interrogation program in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2009.

Gwyn's review could include the involvement of the main spy agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB), which supports NZDF operations in Afghanistan. Gwyn recently released a report into mass surveillance carried out by the GCSB of New Zealand citizens, declaring it was technically legal and therefore justified.

GCSB director-general Andrew Hampton has stressed the agency's concern that the "public are assured that GCSB acted lawfully." Regardless of the heinous actions of the military and intelligence services in Afghanistan, the inquiries will inevitably find that they acted within the law, and no one will be held accountable.

The exposure of the military's involvement in war crimes and the failed efforts to cover them up are a major embarrassment for Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government. Of particular note is the alleged involvement of Willie Apiata, who is frequently promoted as a national hero, especially around annual Anzac Day celebrations.

The allegations have been reported by international media outlets, including the *Washington Post*, along with evidence of similar war crimes by Australian SAS troops.

There has been shock and anger among working people, who have been constantly told by the government and corporate media that New Zealand's armed forces are used only for "humanitarian" and

"peacekeeping" purposes.

The Labour-led coalition is becoming increasingly unpopular as its pro-war, austerity agenda becomes more transparent. Its recent decision to spend \$2.3 billion on four anti-submarine aircraft outraged healthcare workers. Just days before a nationwide strike against low wages and poor working conditions, the government told them there was no money for pay rises.

When *Hit and Run* was published, Labour, New Zealand First and the Greens cynically called for an inquiry, after then-Prime Minister Bill English denied any need for one. The brazenly pro-war character of the government affirms that the call for an inquiry was always a sham.

The Greens, which once postured as anti-war, are now part of the government and support its military build-up. They have not denounced the continued deployment of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. The government will likely confirm next month that around 100 troops will remain in Iraq.

Green Party defence spokesperson Golriz Ghahraman, who is portrayed as a "left," echoed both the attorney-general and the GCSB general-director. She told Fairfax Media on June 14 the inquiry into the SAS "will restore faith in the integrity of our defence forces, which for the most part are incredible men and women committed to upholding our common values in their work."



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