

Australian government boosts Special Forces despite war crimes charges

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The Australian government this week announced extra funding of \$3 billion over 20 years, including \$500 million over the next four years, to upgrade the weapons and resources of the country's Special Forces.

The move is part of the intensifying preparation for war, as well as for the suppression of domestic dissent. Australian governments have relied almost totally on the Special Forces for every military intervention since the Vietnam War. They would also be the units to be deployed internally, with "shoot to kill" powers, to put down riots and protests under the expanded military call-out laws introduced last year.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison made the announcement amid rising accusations by the US and Australian governments that China is engaged in "coercive" conduct in the South China Sea and across the Asia-Pacific. The Trump administration is applying pressure on Canberra to take a more aggressive role in confronting Chinese influence throughout the region.

Citing rising "global threats," Morrison declared: "Our Special Forces, now more than ever, need to be ready and able to deploy on operations anywhere in the world, at short notice, and in very uncertain conditions."

The boost to the Special Forces was a "very important part" of the biggest upgrading of the military since World War II. This language, in itself, points to the rising danger of another world war as the US ruling elite resorts to military means to reassert the global hegemony it established in the last one.

While Morrison avoided specifying the Indo-Pacific as the main target of the Special Forces, that was done for him by Andrew Hastie, an ex-Special Forces commander, who chairs parliament's intelligence and security committee.

Hastie, who has close links to the US military and

intelligence apparatus, spoke to the *Australian* to voice his approval of Morrison's announcement. Hastie outlined a scenario of Special Forces contingents being dispatched across the region, often in "clandestine" raids. "We need the ability to respond rapidly to an evolving situation in the Indo-Pacific by sending a discreet force element to secure our interests," he said.

Just last week, Hastie effectively branded China as a new Nazi threat to the world, comparing Australia's purported failure to respond to the threat posed by China with France's lack of response to the "German advance in 1940."

Defence Minister Linda Reynolds said the government would give the Special Forces "the best body armour; weapons; diving, parachuting, roping and climbing systems; medical search and rescue; communications; human performance training and support; and everything else they need to help ensure Australia's security." This was on top of 16 helicopters previously announced for delivery in 2022.

During a media conference, Morrison said the commandos were needed, "not just overseas" but to "deal with domestic counter-terrorism." Under the banner of combating terrorism, sweeping new powers were created last year for the government or the chief of the armed forces to call out troops to put down "domestic violence."

Standing in front of masked soldiers from the 2nd Commando Regiment at Sydney's Holsworthy military base, Morrison brushed aside a journalist's question about members of the Special Forces remaining under official investigation for war crimes committed in Afghanistan.

Morrison gave the clearest indication that the latest investigation, which has dragged on for three years, is intended to clear the way for further atrocities by the

Special Forces.

Morrison hailed the “wonderful” commandos and insisted they had “an impeccable record” that was “simply extraordinary” in “Afghanistan in particular.” This effectively pre-empted the long-delayed report by Paul Brereton, a judge and major-general in the Army Reserve, into the killings, torture and abuses committed by the Special Forces in Afghanistan.

Morrison’s praise for the Special Forces sheds further light on the driving forces behind Australian Federal Police raid on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Sydney headquarters in June. Detectives spent eight hours pouring through ABC computers and files, seeking evidence against the journalists who were involved in the publication of the “Afghan Files,” which reported some of the crimes committed by the Special Forces.

Former military lawyer David McBride is already on trial for leaking the material, so the raid, like another the day before on the home of senior News Corp journalist Annika Smethurst, sought to send a threatening message to journalists that they also could face years of imprisonment for exposing the operations of the US-backed military and intelligence agencies.

The “Afghan Files” covered “at least 10” incidents between 2009 and 2013 in which military investigators summarily cleared Special Forces soldiers of killing civilians, including children, and other war crimes. Among them were the death of a man and his six-year-old child during a raid on his house, and the killing of a detainee who was alone with a soldier. Another case involved troops, commanded by Hastie, who severed the hands of dead alleged Taliban fighters.

In 2018, a further leak from an inquiry said a Special Forces trooper on his first deployment to Afghanistan was pressured by higher-ranking soldiers to execute an elderly, unarmed detainee. Some soldiers said they overheard the Easter Sunday execution was to “blood the rookie”—an initiation into the job of killing.

Despite some derisory compensation payments, each incident inflamed popular hostility in Afghanistan to the Australian and US occupying forces. Far from being perpetrated by “bad apples” or “poor culture” within the Special Forces, as the corporate media has claimed, these barbarities underscore the inherently criminal character of the ongoing Afghanistan war, which has sought to help secure US control over the

strategic Central Asian region and the Middle East.

The brutal “culture” in the military is a direct result of the neo-colonial wars of occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq, which treat the entire populations as the enemy. Moreover, the rules of engagement of the Australian and other US-led forces permit such killings. Military inquiries have invariably found that soldiers acted within these rules.

The Special Forces have been the primary ground force in Australian military operation since Vietnam precisely because, like their US, British and New Zealand counterparts, they are trained and “blooded” to specialise in secretive targeted killings and assaults. For that they have been lauded by successive US presidents.

The Morrison government has proceeded confident of the support of Labor and the Greens, neither of which has uttered a word of concern, let alone opposition. The last Labor government, which was supported by the Greens, also whitewashed the military’s abuses. In May 2013, for example, Stephen Smith, Labor’s defence minister, rejected complaints by Afghan detainees that they were subjected to humiliating public searches of groin and buttocks areas.

The boosting of the Special Forces is central to the Australian ruling class’s ever-closer incorporation into US war planning, centrally directed against China. Together with the imposition of draconian “foreign interference” laws, it is also a preparation to deal with political and social unrest at home.



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