

New Zealand government, media downplay Australian war crimes in Afghanistan

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An official report documenting war crimes by Australian special forces in Afghanistan, including the killing of at least 39 civilians and prisoners, released on November 18, has been virtually ignored by New Zealand's Labour Party government and much of the media.

The report, produced by an inquiry headed by retired Major General Paul Brereton, was aimed at limiting the damage to Australia's elite special forces. The report implicates 25 unnamed soldiers in the killings but no one has yet been charged and any prosecutions could take up to 10 years. The inquiry shielded commanding officers, saying they had no knowledge of what was clearly a common practice of murdering unarmed Afghans, including children.

New Zealand is a close military ally of Australia and the two countries' armed forces have worked together in Afghanistan, Iraq and many other imperialist wars and interventions. Both countries are members of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance, led by the United States.

The Brereton report, which was front page news in every major Australian newspaper last Friday, was buried by NZ's major news websites, the *New Zealand Herald*, *Stuff*, TVNZ and Newstalk ZB. *Newshub* reporter Olivia Leeming echoed the Australian media's line that most Australian troops "served with honour" and the military's "reputation has potentially been sullied by the actions of a few." Only the state-owned Radio NZ (RNZ) treated the report as a major story.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has not condemned Australia's war crimes. She made no comment on the Brereton report, and was not asked about it, during interviews on Monday with RNZ and Newstalk ZB, or at her weekly press conference, which lasted 40 minutes.

Defence Minister Peeni Henare responded to the revelations by telling RNZ that "no New Zealand service personnel were persons of interest to the inquiry." He said the relationship with "our closest ally" would "remain strong" and he had no concerns about the culture in the NZ special forces. An editorial in Christchurch's the *Press* echoed this, declaring that NZ soldiers "do not seem to share the nihilistic lack of values that have been exposed by the Brereton report."

In fact, tens of thousands of civilians have been killed during nearly two decades of war by the US and its allies, including both Australia and New Zealand. The atrocities stem from the criminal, imperialist character of the war, aimed at cementing US control over the strategically important region. The occupying troops view the civilian population as hostile. Drone strikes, bombings, assassinations and torture are the methods used to instill terror in the population.

The war, accompanied by propaganda from the media and politicians depicting Muslims as potential terrorists, emboldened fascists in Australia and New Zealand, including Brenton Tarrant, who last year massacred 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch. The Brereton report shows that the terrorist, painted in the media as an isolated individual, was actually engaged in similar actions to SAS troops in Afghanistan.

The NZSAS took part in the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Successive Labour Party and National Party governments redeployed these forces, whose services as highly-trained killers were greatly valued by Washington. In 2007, the NZSAS received a rare citation from US President George Bush for "heroism and outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy in Afghanistan."

The NZSAS has been accused of war crimes

including the killing of Afghan civilians and handing over prisoners for torture by others. A lengthy royal commission of inquiry into the 2010 Operation Burnham, a night-time raid on a village in which the NZSAS participated, confirmed in July this year that a child and at least seven other people were killed. Labour's Attorney-General David Parker defended the killings, saying they were "undesirable" but "legal."

The New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) had initially denied that the raid took place, after the details were exposed in the 2017 book, *Hit and Run*, by journalists Nicky Hager and Jon Stephenson. Hager wrote on the *Spinoff* website that the cover-up went beyond the NZDF: "Throughout the inquiry process a team of lawyers representing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and intelligence agencies made submissions and spoke at hearings, in virtually every instance presenting legal advice that implied NZDF had done nothing wrong."

Commenting on the Australian war crimes report, Hager told RNZ yesterday he believed NZ forces had behaved similarly. He said: "Anyone working in this field, including me, has heard a series of similarly ugly rumours of guilty secrets inside our SAS, just like they lasted for so long inside the Australian SAS just as guilty secrets... What we had with Operation Burnham was just one incident."

The Green Party, which is part of the Labour-led government, issued a statement saying it "strongly condemns" the alleged killings by the Australian SAS. Greens defence spokesperson Golriz Ghahraman said: "These revelations compound my relief that last term we worked with [the] government to ensure New Zealand troops withdrew from what began as America's illegal war in Afghanistan."

In fact, although the Greens voted against the NZSAS participating in the initial invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the party later supported the NZ Army's involvement in the war on the phony pretext that the soldiers were engaged in "peacekeeping." The Green Party supports the government's multi-billion dollar modernisation and expansion of the armed forces, saying they will be used for "humanitarian" purposes.

The trade union-backed *Daily Blog* said the Australian SAS crimes called into question the Operation Burnham inquiry, which editor Martyn Bradbury described as a "whitewash." He also claimed

that while former Prime Minister Helen Clark's Labour Party government had led the country into the war in Afghanistan, "Alliance MPs stood firm [against it]."

Bradbury quoted former FIRST Union leader Robert Reid's tweet: "Respect to Laila Harre and other Alliance MPs who opposed NZ's involvement in this terrible war at the cost of their own political careers."

Bradbury and Reid are brazenly falsifying history. The pseudo-left Alliance Party, which was part of Clark's coalition government, voted in parliament in 2001 to support sending the NZSAS to Afghanistan. Harre, who was minister of women's affairs, "didn't oppose [the decision] in caucus or cabinet," the *New Zealand Herald* noted on November 22, 2001.

Nine out of ten Alliance MPs voted in favour and one abstained. Soon afterwards the party disintegrated, unable to continue posturing as a "left" alternative to Labour.

The *Daily Blog* and FIRST Union both supported the Labour Party and the Greens in the October election. One union official wrote in *Jacobin* that Labour's victory was "a win for the whole political left." In fact, the Labour government is overseeing rapidly rising poverty and inequality, while funneling billions to big business, the banks and the military.

The Ardern government is intent on covering up New Zealand and Australian war crimes in Afghanistan because it is strengthening the alliance with US imperialism, as Washington ramps up its threats and preparations for war against Iran and China.

Yesterday, Ardern held a 20-minute conversation with US President-elect Joe Biden, which she described as "very positive and warm." She told the media Biden wanted to "reinvigorate the relationship" and she had invited him to New Zealand next year for the 70th anniversary of the ANZUS security treaty being signed between the US, Australia and New Zealand.



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