

Australia announces withdrawal from Afghanistan

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Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced last Thursday that the country's remaining 80 troops in Afghanistan will be withdrawn by the end of the year, bringing to a close Australia's continuous involvement in the longest-running war of recent history.

The announcement underscored the extent to which Morrison's Liberal-National Coalition government, with the full support of the Labor opposition, is marching in lockstep with the US administration of President Joseph Biden. It came a day after Biden had declared that American troops would leave Afghanistan by the end of the year.

As the WSWs has noted, the withdrawal will not end the decades of imperialist criminality visited upon the Afghan people. The Central Asian nation will still be ruled over by a US-aligned puppet government, thousands of American military advisors and intelligence operatives will remain, and murderous drone warfare is to continue.

Morrison, like Biden, presented the invasion and occupation, which has claimed at least 100,000 Afghan lives and further laid waste to one of the poorest countries on earth, as a noble exercise in philanthropy.

The PM affected emotion as he read out the names of the 41 Australian military personnel who died in the conflict. The war had taken a heavy toll, Morrison said, but "freedom is always worth it...That is why Australians who have served in our defence forces have always pulled on that uniform."

One reporter pointed to the elephant in the room, referencing the official Brereton report, released last November. It found credible evidence that Australian troops had committed war crimes in Afghanistan, including at least 39 murders, torture, and a redacted incident described as "possibly the most disgraceful episode in Australia's military history."

Morrison was having none of it. "There will be time to talk about those things. Today is not that time," he replied.

In fact, the government and Labor opposition do not want to talk about the atrocities at any time. Five months after the Brereton report appeared, an official investigation into whether criminal charges can be brought against any of the perpetrators is proceeding at a snail's pace.

Despite the fact that no one has been held accountable, Defence Minister Peter Dutton has insisted that it is time to

move on and for the military to "get back to business." His assistant minister Andrew Hastie, a former special forces captain in Afghanistan, was more explicit, declaring last week that the military had to focus on its "core business," which was the "application of lethal violence in the defence of our values, sovereignty and interests."

Liberal backbencher and Afghan veteran Phillip Thompson, who is collaborating closely with Dutton and Hastie, added that the military had been beleaguered in recent times by a culture of "woke" political correctness. When soldiers were deployed on operations, Thompson said, they needed to "have an unapologetic aggression and violence to get the mission done."

Dutton put this line into practice yesterday, overruling a recommendation from the Brereton Inquiry for the removal of a "meritorious citation" awarded to the Special Operations Task Group. The award honoured the group for its activities over the same period that some of its members were accused of murdering, torturing and otherwise terrorising the Afghan population.

In other words, the capstone of Australia's involvement in Afghanistan is a more or less open defence of shock troops accused of the gravest violations of international law. This underscores the criminality of Australia's participation in the war, and the fraudulent character of the paeans to a supposedly "humanitarian mission" by virtually the entire political and media establishment.

Australia's two decades in Afghanistan implicate the ruling class in all of the crimes committed by the US and allied forces against the oppressed nation.

This began with the 2001 invasion itself. The Coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard was among the most enthusiastic participants in the launching of a war of aggression.

Together with Labor leader Kim Beazley, dubbed "bomber Beazley" because of his promotion of imperialist interventions, the Howard government touted the fraudulent claim that the conflict was a legitimate "war on terror" prompted by the 9/11 attacks, and immediately committed troops. In reality, the US had long been preparing a war aimed at securing greater dominance over the geo-strategically crucial Central Asian region.

Australian troop numbers ebbed and flowed over the course of the conflict, in line with the requests of the US, but the unconditional support for the occupation, on the part of Labor and the Coalition, has been a constant.

The first public allegations of Australian war crimes, date from 2006, and involve reports of unarmed civilians being shot dead. Between 2001 and 2009, the Australian authorities paid some \$120,000 in compensation to Afghan civilians—a tacit admission that such events did take place. Every military force involved in the occupation has had similar charges laid against it.

The most-heavily documented Australian war crimes, covered in the Brereton report, span from 2009 to 2013. The timing is hardly an accident, coinciding with the most active combat role that Australian troops took at any point during the occupation. While Australia's troop deployment may not have been as large as other US allies, it played a crucial role in the illegal war, stepping in precisely when the US occupation was under challenge.

In 2010, as Afghan militias stepped up their struggle against the occupation, the US intensified a "counter-insurgency" operation, including through a massive troop surge overseen by the Obama administration. The Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard fully supported this effort, presiding over a dramatic increase of Australia's participation in US "kill or capture" operations targeting alleged Taliban commanders.

Contemporaneous press reports revealed that between December 2010 and September 2011, Australian troops had played a central role in more than 30 of these decapitation raids.

During this period, Australian forces took a lead role in Uruzgan province, following the withdrawal of troops by the Netherlands. There they partnered with Matiullah Khan, a warlord involved in drug-running, extortion and the murder of his political rivals.

The actions of the Australian special forces, as documented in the Brereton report and whistleblower exposures, themselves resemble those of a criminal gang. Junior soldiers were "blooded" by murdering civilians; illegal killings were covered up by planting weapons on the victims, detainees were routinely tortured, if not done away with altogether.

While the Brereton report states that there is evidence of 39 murders, it acknowledges that there were likely more. There is good reason to believe that the figure is a significant understatement. A preliminary 2016 report heard accounts of My Lai-style massacres. When they raided a village, Australian troops "would take the men and boys to these guest houses and interrogate them, meaning tie them up and torture them." After the soldiers left, "the men and boys would be found dead, shot in the head, sometimes blindfolded and throats slit. These are corroborated accounts."

The entire Australian establishment is implicated in the atrocities. This includes various Greens and left-liberals, who

promoted the Afghan occupation as the "good war," contrasting it with the "quagmire" in Iraq and even claiming that it was being waged to advance the rights of women as such crimes were taking place.

The official haste to move on from the war crimes is a continuation of a protracted cover-up. It is motivated by the untenable character of the central claim of the Brereton report, namely that no one in government or military command was aware of the crimes as they were being carried out. In reality, the atrocities flowed directly from the "counter-insurgency" operation presided over by governments and army headquarters, and the predatory nature of the entire war.

The attempts to downplay the war crimes, coupled with the promotion of an "aggressive" military oriented to the "application of lethal force," are also bound up with Australia's central role in the US preparations for war against China. Biden's withdrawal is explicitly aimed at concentrating American forces in the Indo-Pacific, to target China, and in eastern Europe, where they are directed against Russia.

Australia has been aligned with the US "pivot to Asia," since it was announced by Obama in 2011. Dutton and Morrison, with the backing of Labor have signalled a further intensification of Australian involvement, backing all of the provocations and threats against Beijing by the Trump and Biden administrations over the past year. Dutton's recent installation as defence minister has coincided with the announcement of plans for a further Australian military build-up, including through a domestic program to construct missiles for the first time since the 1960s.

An article in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* last week, hailing Dutton's "support" for soldiers and his opposition to the revocation of the special forces meritorious citation, bluntly declared: "Heightened security threats, including the possibility of a great power conflict over Taiwan, mean Australia's service men and women must be ready for whatever lies ahead."

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality in Australia and New Zealand is holding an online meeting in opposition to the drive to war against China at 4 p.m. [AEST] on Saturday, April 24. Register here.



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