

Australia sends spy planes to join US military intervention in the Philippines

By Mike Head
24 June 2017

The Australian government yesterday announced the dispatch of air force surveillance planes to the Philippines, purportedly to assist the Manila government's suppression of alleged "ISIS-inspired" terrorists on the island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

Although the initial deployment by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government consists of just two AP-3C Orion aircraft, they will form part of an intensive operation by US Special Forces and the Philippine military, and therefore the decision has a wider significance.

Officially, the Philippines agreed to Australia's participation. Australian Defence Minister Marise Payne said the Philippines government "accepted an Australian offer" of support to help fight attacks by "Daesh-inspired groups" in Marawi City in northwest Mindanao.

Without elaborating, Payne also claimed that the fighting in Marawi posed an actual threat to Australia. "The regional threat from terrorism, in particular from Daesh and foreign fighters, is a direct threat to Australia and our interests," she said in her media release.

Payne made no mention of President Rodrigo Duterte. Instead, she said: "I recently spoke with my counterpart Secretary of Defense Delfin Lorenzana about how Australia can assist the Philippines in its fight against extremists."

In reality, Washington and its protégés in the Philippines military have seized upon the conflict in Marawi, which began as a battle between rival clans, to effectively undermine Duterte, who was shifting Manila's foreign policy away from the US and toward China.

The US Embassy in Manila and the Philippine

military revealed on June 9 that US Special Forces have been involved in the Marawi battle since it was launched last month. Duterte told a media conference he had no knowledge of the US participation.

Duterte had previously vowed to eject US military personnel—officially trainers and advisers—from the Philippines. Currently, the US has no permanent military presence in the country, a former US colony, but has maintained rotations of Special Forces and signed an agreement with Duterte's predecessor, Benigno Aquino, to secure access to military bases in the country.

Although the media claims there are no US "boots on the ground," Filipino journalists have posted photographs on twitter of heavily-armed American combat forces, unloading supplies in Marawi. American P-3 Orion surveillance planes have been filmed over the town, reportedly conducting targeting and electronic eavesdropping.

The Australian aircraft are likely to be closely engaged in the fighting as well. Peter Jennings, executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), an Australian government-funded think tank, told the *New York Times* the planes are configured to look for people on the ground.

"Normally they're maritime surveillance aircraft, but we use them very effectively in the counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan," Jennings said. "This will be about helping to locate targets of training camps, individual insurgent fighters. It'll be quite a serious commitment."

Speaking to the *Australian*, Defense Secretary Lorenzana indicated a broader role for the Australian aircraft. He said they would be used for surveillance across Marawi, central Mindanao, and Basilan and Sulu—areas of southern Mindanao province—as well as

the Sulu Sea, a stretch of water between the southern Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, adjacent to the South China Sea.

The conflict in Marawi, in which nearly 400 people have now been killed and a quarter of a million residents displaced, provided the military with the pretext to declare martial law on the island of Mindanao, and its population of over 22 million.

The battle erupted on May 23, just as Duterte arrived in Moscow to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The military launched a raid against what it claimed was the ISIS headquarters in the Philippines. Defense Secretary Lorenzana then declared military rule, compelling Duterte to return immediately to the Philippines.

In other words, it was not the president who imposed martial law in Mindanao but the military chiefs, who have strong ties to the Pentagon. Washington is using the Marawi battle to discipline Duterte and reorient Manila's geopolitical ties away from Beijing and Moscow, and firmly back into the camp of US imperialism.

Significantly, Australia's deployment was announced in Canberra, not Manila. Later in the day yesterday, Ernesto Abella, Duterte's spokesman, told a news conference in Davao City that the Philippines appreciated Australia's offer. He said the Philippine government "would gladly welcome any form of foreign assistance allowed under our constitution to help suppress the rebellion in Marawi."

According to media reports, Australia's involvement in Mindanao was discussed at this month's annual Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) talks in Sydney, where US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson sent a blunt message to China to end its reclamation activities in the South China Sea.

After the meeting, Tillerson declared that the US and Australia "speak with one voice" in opposing China's "militarisation of features" in the South China Sea. It amounted to a warning, not just to China but also Asian nations such as the Philippines that have tilted toward Beijing in a bid to boost economic relations.

Together with ASPI's Jennings, other figures within Australia's military-strategic complex have welcomed the Philippines deployment and suggested it should be broadened.

Writing in the tabloid *Sydney Daily Telegraph*,

Catherine McGregor, an ex-military officer and adviser to former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, declared: "My own view is that for both military and diplomatic reasons we should urgently commit combat forces to this fight."

McGregor said John Blaxland, a former military intelligence officer who now heads the Strategic Studies Centre at Australian National University, supports a "holistic" package, including "police training by the AFP [Australian Federal Police] and joint naval patrols of porous approaches to the Philippines."

Australia's initial deployment could be the start of a major military involvement in the region for the first time since the Vietnam War. Filipino military spokesmen this week told the media that the fighting in Marawi could be long and bloody.

Brigadier General Restituto Padilla Jr described the conflict in Marawi as a "very complicated engagement." He compared it to prolonged offensives against "terrorists" overseas, such as in the Iraqi cities of Mosul, Ramadi and Fallujah, where thousands of people have died in assaults by US-backed forces.

Brigadier General Gilbert Gapay, the Eastern Mindanao Command deputy chief, said Australia's aircraft would help the military quell rebellion not just in Marawi, but "in all other parts of Mindanao."

Under the cover of the "war on terrorism," the Mindanao deployment opens up another front in Canberra's escalating involvement in predatory and provocative US military operations globally.

The Turnbull government recently increased the Australian contingent in the US-led war in Afghanistan, adding 30 troops to make a total of 300. Australian bombers have also resumed their attacks in Iraq, which were briefly suspended because of the danger of possible clashes with Russian jets after the US shot down a Syrian government plane.

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