



## The Role of the Military in New Zealand's Response to COVID

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The New Zealand government adopted a “go hard and go early” elimination strategy regarding the Covid-19 pandemic after the first active case was identified in the country on 28 February 2020. Borders were closed on 19 March and an alert level system introduced on 21 March that ranged from Level 1 (no restrictions) to Level 4 (strict restrictions on movement — or full lockdown). The New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) was initially called upon to deliver humanitarian aid to families in need but were soon drawn into their biggest active deployment since 1999. This paper argues that “OP PROTECT,” the name given to the NZDF pandemic deployment, may indeed have increased attrition rates, caused “skill fade” and degraded readiness, as noted by a number of commentators, but it also emphasises that the deployment provides some positive opportunities too.

Knowing the context for the delivery of an elimination strategy helps to explain high levels of public support and engagement. Prior to the pandemic, the Labour-New Zealand First coalition government had earned a great deal of social approval for its sensitive handling of the March 2019 Christchurch Mosque attack and the December 2019 White Island volcanic eruption. When the pandemic hit, official narratives then emphasised the need to pull together again as a “team of 5 million”, with an official policy of a need to “Be Kind” under ongoing stressful conditions. Public approval of the Jacinda Arden-led government’s approach to managing the pandemic was confirmed by the September 2020 elections. The election results delivered a majority Labour government— a highly unusual situation in a mixed member proportional democracy where coalition governments are the norm.

As the pandemic developed and as the Delta variant emerged in 2021, the government emphasized vaccination and proactive management. Economically, the country has thus far remained robust, though the pandemic did exacerbate gender pay issues, socio-economic issues, the disparity of health outcomes for different groups (particularly New Zealand’s indigenous population). It also laid bare the dire nature of New Zealand’s housing crisis.

These broad political, social, and economic trends set the backdrop for the NZDF’s engagement, as do the high levels of public trust



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in both the New Zealand Police and the NZDF and the recent acclaim earned by the NZDF in domestic Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief roles. Here the response to the 2012 Christchurch earthquake was especially notable. This increased domestic presence of the NZDF was confirmed with “new” recognised arenas within which the NZDF operates: “community, nation, world” in the 2018 Strategic Defence Policy Statement.

### Deployment context

The NZDF was soon called upon to engage in a comprehensive manner in the pandemic response. The New Zealand government activated its National Security System on 27 January 2020 in response to the growing spread of COVID-19, standing up a National Health Coordination Centre shortly after. On March 10, a National Crisis Management Centre was activated, augmented by an Operational Command Centre. Key actors at this initial stage were predominantly civilian, and included the Director General of Health, the Commissioner of Police and representatives from the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management (Kitteridge et al., 2020). As a result of its “go hard and go early” approach to the pandemic, as noted in the timeline below, the New

Zealand government closed its borders on March 19, then initiated a national State of Emergency on 23 March, and put the country into Level Four lockdown four days later.

The legal justification for these executive decisions drew on the Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002 and the Health Act 1956 (McLean et al., 2020). Later, on 13 May, the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020 was also passed by the New Zealand Parliament. These legislative frameworks enabled the government to call on the NZDF to play a significant role in helping it police and manage cordons and quarantine facilities.

### Taskings

When the National Crisis Management Centre was activated to coordinate the national response to COVID-19, the NZDF provided personnel in a range of planning functions across government (approximately 80 personnel). Then, from 10 April onward, the NZDF provided staff (approximately 300) to help operate managed isolation and quarantine facilities (colloquially known as MIQ) (McGuinness Institute COVID-19 timeline, 2021). This latter commitment soon ballooned as demand for MIQ placements skyrocketed, particularly as New Zealand

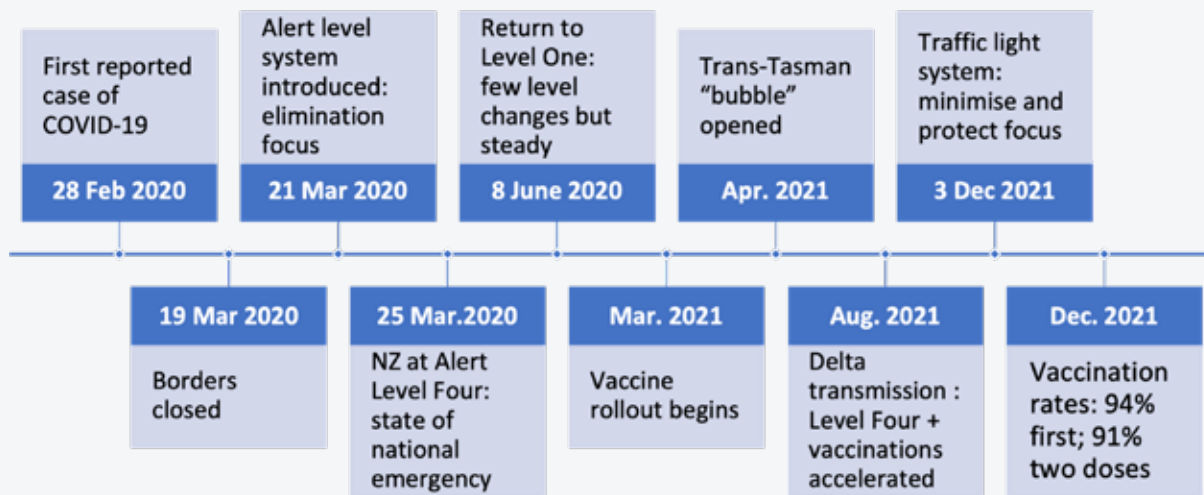


Figure 1: Timeline of Key Events

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nationals were seeking to return home. From August 2020 to the end of 2021, the NZDF provided 900-1200 staff on rotation for COVID-related tasks, making this the largest deployment in terms of monthly number of troops deployed since the height of engagement in peacekeeping roles in Timor-Leste (1999–2002).<sup>1</sup>

Under the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020, the Director General of Health has granted enforcement officer powers to NZDF personnel working within MIQ Facilities. They can give legally enforceable directions (such as requiring a person to stay in their room), and to request a person to provide identifying information (NZDF 2021). Due to a loss of public confidence in contracted security, the NZDF maintains perimeter security of the MIQs, and the NZDF also facilitates the all-of-government teams in the Managed Isolation and Quarantine centres, managing guests, medical staff, logistics, civilian staff, and private sector employees.

The NZDF has three main roles in MIQ: security, day-to-day operations within each facility, and leadership roles across regional centres and the national office in Wellington (Scott, 2021). NZDF personnel are also staffing vehicle checkpoints in support of NZ Police and providing support to the New Zealand Customs Service. Defence Force personnel can enter areas, buildings, vehicles, give directions, and request a person to provide identifying information (Mark, 2021), whilst also helping to deliver vaccines to Pacific islands — such as to Cook Islands and Tokelau in September 2021. NZDF personnel have also assisted with Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) supply chain planning, completed P-3K2 Orion surveillance flights for the New Zealand Police, provided bespoke logistics support, and repatriated New Zealand citizens from abroad. The NZDF's commitment to OP PROTECT over the last few years has had significant consequences for the institution.

### Consequences

It is important to note the scale of NZDF's commitment to OP PROTECT. The NZDF generally has around 10,000 personnel at its disposal — the Army has approximately 4600 regular force staff, the Air Force 2540, and the Navy 2200. The Army is therefore essentially a Brigade, the Air Force a single fixed wing/rotary squadron (assets don't include combat aircrafts), and the Navy has two frigates, a new ice-breaker vessel and smaller patrol vessels. These forces experience constant rotation over varying timeframes depending on their OP PROTECT task: there is an element deployed and element preparing to deploy and an element recovering and following post covid protocols. The demands of the deployment have impacted morale.

In February 2021 the Chief of Defence Force Kevin Short suggested that “People are indicating they're not happy with certain aspects. But in general, they're happy with being in the Defence Force... We're actually looking at the figures on a monthly basis to see if there is a spike caused through people's morale... But that's not happening at the moment, attrition is as low as I've ever seen it” (Manch, 2021). But of the 136 staff who completed exit surveys between April 1 and June 30, almost 17% identified Operation Protect as a “somewhat important” or “very important” factor when deciding to leave the organisation (Van Beynen, 2021). More recent figures have shown that 338 personnel left the NZDF in 2021 up to October, with a third of them citing involvement in OP PROTECT as a factor in their decision to leave and with 227 of these resignations coming from the Army (Block, 2021a). The Army has been hardest hit with an attrition rate in 2021 of 10.6% (Block, 2021b). Within Army, certain trades (e.g. electrical fitters, plumbers and drain layers) will likely have been disproportionately impacted as, as highlighted by Chief of Staff Air Commodore Andy Woods, New Zealand is currently experiencing a “concurrent skilled labour shortage associated with

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border restrictions [that] has heightened this external pull” (Van Beynen, 2021).

Woods also expressed a commonly held concern that the deployment entailed “reduced capacity to respond to major events such as a major earthquake or a Pacific security crisis” (Van Beynen, 2021). There has been much discussion about the impact of OP PROTECT on other military commitments. “I am conscious that the NZDFs ability to respond to a Christchurch [type] of Kaikōura scale earthquake, or a Pacific event of the size of Tropical Cyclone Winston in Fiji, will remain degraded for the foreseeable future,” Chief of Defence Force Kevin Short told Minister of Defense Peeni Henare in June. “If you take 1300 people out of our normal operations then of course, it’s going to have an effect on our response options.” (Short cited in Patterson, 2021). The disruption to regular international engagements of just over 200 personnel that need to be rotated, core force generation activities like the training new recruits, management of career promotion courses, professional development, participation in international exercises, and routine naval and air patrols have all been compounded by contingency missions that also occurred during this period such as flood relief on the South Island and support to the Afghan national extraction.

Relatedly, CDF Short suggested that there has been a “skill fade of core military competencies” with the disruption of normal activities. The Opposition National Party’s defence spokesperson Chris Penk has suggested that the “cumulative degradation” of sustaining this operational tempo has “seen the Army lose the ability to train collectively above the small teams level” (Penk cited in Patterson, 2021). Making the situation worse, Penk suggests, is that due to the “sensitive and high profile” nature of OP PROTECT, many required are of more senior rank, Corporal through to Major, the same people needed to lead the “raise, train and sustain functions” of the force (Penk cited in Patterson, 2021). Moreover, this high tempo

of rotations has impacted morale by straining military families and has impacted the ability of the NZDF to conduct its usual training and to take up other development opportunities. Perceived pay differences stemming from better pandemic allowances has also caused friction between NZDF frontline personnel and staff operating in headquarter roles (Fisher 2021).

Despite these strains, however, OP PROTECT has provided operational experience of a particular kind. Air Commodore Darren Webb, the very first NZDF MIQ lead that was appointed in June 2020, emphasised that OP PROTECT is “absolutely a deployment. It’s a stressful task. It’s repetitive, it’s monotonous, but the consequences and the stakes are really high” (cited in Daalder, 2021). OP PROTECT has been a vital deployment in enabling the New Zealand government to successfully contain the virus; it has required the polishing of so-called “soft skills” in dealing with the public; it has demanded high levels of discipline in terms of force protection and normal deployment-related requirements; and, lastly, it has provided breathing space to consider the possibilities of broader structural change in upcoming regeneration efforts.

### Recommendations

A commissioned report written by Murray Jack and Katherine Corich noted that “The impact of Defence Force staff rotations [is] significant [...] Significant time is devoted to induction, however, there is inevitably a loss of accumulated knowledge which impacts efficiency.” (Scott, 2021). The report raised concerns about the constant need to hand over roles: “Handovers take time and there are risks that they are not sufficient,” the report said. “Rotation also makes it difficult to embed continual improvement.” This 2021 report strongly urged reducing reliance on the Defence Force for staffing MIQs. On 3 December 2021, New Zealand moved to a new “traffic light” management system. This framework shifted the country away from elimination and into a new phase

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of management focused on minimising the spread of COVID and emphasising protection via vaccination. As of early 2022, the government continues to require MIQ stays and the NZDF continues to provide large numbers of personnel to OP PROTECT, but discussions have been initiated about civilianising the roles currently occupied by NZDF personnel and broader structural changes for managing COVID-19 cases are occurring. The Sergeant Major of the Army, in addressing attrition concerns, thus posted encouraging statements on social media emphasising that “there is a change in the wind. 2022 will be a revised year focusing on training, travel and regeneration” (cited in Block, 2021b).

Regeneration projects provide an opportunity to advocate for more sweeping changes in terms of platforms or doctrine or force structure or culture in general. The NZDF has been seeking, for example, to promote diversity and inclusion programs and to grapple with the demands of ‘grey’ operations. Attrition from OP PROTECT may act to push out some of those who are incapable of adapting or of accepting that “serving” one’s country might require something other than traditional warfighting or even peacekeeping. Pushing through broader change might be most possible at this juncture.

Finally, this deployment has also brought to light some of the pressing welfare issues facing soldiers. Military benefits have been eroded over time, and the provision of subsidised housing is an especially problematic area for the NZDF. The NZDF has stepped up and served well in trying conditions, and this provides a strong base from which to request help from the government to address contemporary welfare issues.

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### Endnotes

- 1 A MIQ is a contracted hotel that holds people entering New Zealand for 14 days and 3 COVID tests. Each facility is staffed by a team with representatives from the Ministry of Health responsible for health and well-being, from the Ministry of Defence responsible for administration and logistics, from Police and Aviation Security responsible for security and from the Ministry of Social Development responsible for the wellbeing of those staying in these facilities. Some facilities also have contracted security guards provided by private firms. NZDF personnel make up the second largest contingent of people staffing MIQ facilities approximately 16% behind the hotel staff at 40% (Scott, 2021).