

Six dead and 20,000 displaced

Solomon Islands accord paves the way for further conflict

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A British Commonwealth brokered agreement reached last week on the small, impoverished Pacific nation of the Solomon Islands has temporarily halted inter-community violence by local gangs of thugs but has only entrenched the underlying tensions that led to the conflict.

Three weeks ago an armed group calling itself the Isatabu Freedom Fighters (IFF) on the island of Guadalcanal began terrorising people who had migrated from the neighbouring island of Malaita. Up to 20,000 Malaitan people were driven from their homes and workplaces at gunpoint. A number of homes were torched and at least six people are confirmed dead.

Thousands of Malaitans, some of whom have lived on Guadalcanal for several generations, have been forced onto crowded ferries back to Malaita while many more are taking temporary refuge in makeshift camps in the capital of Honiara. Malaitans made up the majority of the workforce at the British-owned oil palm plantation in Binu on Guadalcanal and at Ross Mining's Gold Ridge venture.

One of the IFF leaders, George Gray, insisted: "We want all Malaitans in Guadalcanal repatriated back to their land. We want them gone. We want the government to lift the state of emergency... we are prepared to lay down our arms if the government adheres to our demands." But if these demands were not met, Gray warned: "From here we can mount an attack on Honiara and kill all the Malaitans, wipe them out, in just three hours. It will take us just three hours to do that."

Former Fijian military strongman Sitiveni Rabuka was appointed as British Commonwealth Special Envoy to hold talks in the Solomon Islands. He immediately attracted criticism after making statements sympathetic to the actions of the IFF's armed gangs. Rabuka seized power in a military coup in 1987 after fomenting racial tensions between the country's ethnic Indian and Fijian communities. He was defeated in elections earlier this year but not before further institutionalising the country's racial divisions within its constitution.

The accord brokered by Rabuka in the Solomons accepts as a fait accompli the forced repatriation of Malaitans from Guadalcanal, and while calling for the immediate disarming of

all Guadalcanal armed groups, it goes a long way to acceding to their demands. The deal struck between the Solomon Islands government and the provincial governments of Guadalcanal and Malaita has been endorsed by the armed groups on Guadalcanal and welcomed by the Commonwealth Secretary-general, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, in London.

The Solomon Islands only has a population of about 400,000 spread over its 347 inhabited islands—Guadalcanal is the largest island, but Malaita, only 50 kilometres away, is more populous. The conflict dates back to 1978 when the country achieved formal independence from British colonial rule. Many Malaitians came to Guadalcanal in search of work, often squatting on land around Honiara and securing jobs in the country's public service including in the police force.

As the country's economic crisis deepened last year, Ezekiel Alebua, former prime minister and current Guadalcanal provincial chairman, demanded a government levy of \$SI10 from every non-Guadalcanal islander living on Guadalcanal. He also called for compensation from the national government for 25 Guadalcanal people allegedly killed at the hands of individual Malaitans since 1978. In the midst of the conflict the Solomon Islands government paid \$SI2.5 million into a Reconciliation Trust Account to be controlled by the Guadalcanal provincial council.

The recent accord acknowledges the demands of Alebua and the IFF leadership for greater local powers over the sale and use of land, migration from other provinces and the distribution over the island's revenue. A committee is to review the current provincial government system and make recommendations to strengthen its powers.

Furthermore, strong penalties are to be enforced to deter squatters in Guadalcanal. This measure is specifically aimed at preventing poor Malaitan workers from moving back to Guadalcanal in search of work and could well be used to deport Malaitan workers from the outskirts of Honiara. The accord calls for "an equal and fair representation" in the national civil service, a proviso that will almost certainly mean discrimination against Malaitan workers.

The accord suggests compensation for the original

landowners and also calls for a review of the country's land laws, a move which could also pave the way for changes to the present system of communal landownership. The World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the Bank of Hawaii have all criticised communal land ownership, which at present accounts for 87 percent of the country's land, as a barrier to logging and mining developments. In the past a number of logging operations have been shut down by local groups over land ownership concerns.

Despite the signing of the accord, the government is maintaining the state of emergency declared two weeks ago which provides the police with a series of highly repressive powers. The police can arrest anyone without a warrant, enter and search any premises and seize documents. Any person saying, writing or displaying anything that may be considered likely to cause "fear, annoyance or danger" can be jailed for six months. Likewise anything spoken or written that may "cause disharmony" will result in six months jail. The Prime Minister can restrict the movements of anyone, detain them indefinitely or have them deported. Curfews can be imposed at any time. Already over 40 people have been arrested.

Tough measures have been taken against the media. The government-owned Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation has also announced the ending of live rebroadcasting of news from the British BBC and Radio Australia. Newspaper editors have been threatened with prison terms of two years if they breach the emergency regulations. Foreign journalists have been threatened with deportation or jail if they breach the emergency regulations.

Underlying the sharp tensions and inter-island conflict has been the sharp decline in the economy produced by the Asian economic crisis. The Solomon Island economy is based on the export of raw materials mainly to Asian countries and is completely dependent on foreign investment—mainly from Australia, Britain and Japan but also the US and New Zealand.

Between 50 percent and 60 percent of total export income is from the sale of round logs and 31 percent of government revenue is from logging. In the first quarter of 1998, the average price for timber plummeted to just \$US30 per cubic metre from \$US150 per cubic metre in the same period the previous year, devastating the country's income. As of September last year there were 300,000 cubic metres of timber stockpiled.

World Bank figures show that the Solomon Islands had an average GDP growth rate of 4.5 percent for the decade up to 1995. The figure slumped in 1996 to 0.6 percent. In 1997 the economy shrank by 0.5 percent and in 1998 contracted by a huge 10 percent.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu who was former head of the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers, came to power in elections in August 1997 at the head of the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change. Faced with an economic crisis and growing indebtedness, the previous

government led by Solomon Mamaloni was unable to pay public servants' wages, government creditors or regional governments.

In November 1997 the new government of Ulufa'alu in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund issued a "Statement of Policies". The key policy was the redirection of the country's resources to the country's private economy through the privatisation and cutting of the public sector including downsizing and the freezing of wages, payment of the country's debt, and the further exploitation of forest, marine and mineral resources.

In December 1997 the government devalued the Solomon Island dollar by 20 percent, announced the axing of 550 public servant jobs and the cutting of funding for public servants' housing. Public sector wages consumed 40 percent of the government budget and interest payments on the government debt accounted for another 18 percent.

The Solomon Islands is one of the most underdeveloped nations in the Pacific. About 80 percent of the population live on subsistence agriculture. There are 300 distinct cultural and over 80 language groups with 60 percent of the population still living in villages of less than 200 people. Around 45 percent of the population are aged below 15. Only 40 percent of children aged between 6 and 12 attend school. Lack of rudimentary health services means that 45 percent of the population is infected with malaria.

Incapable of resolving the economic and social crisis facing the majority of the population, national and local leaders have increasingly exploited community and inter-island tensions as a means of bolstering their own political position and enhancing the economic position of their group at the expense of others. Far from ending the conflict, the latest accord will entrench the divisions and lay the basis for the eruption of further hostilities.



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