

# Solomon Islands ceasefire could pave the way for Australian troops

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In a further sign of increasingly aggressive military activity on the part of Australia throughout the South Pacific, leaders of the warring ethnic factions in the Solomon Islands assembled on board an Australian warship this week to sign a ceasefire agreement that could soon see Australian troops deployed as truce monitors.

The pact was literally signed under duress, after months of heavy-handed intervention, which has involved two personal visits by Australia's Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. Two months ago, despite the extreme hardship and economic devastation caused by the 20-month civil war, Canberra cut off all aid and assistance to the Solomons until a ceasefire was signed.

The unprecedented ceremony aboard the *HMAS Tobruk* came just days after Fiji's military, also acting under direct pressure from Canberra, carried out mass arrests of coup leader George Speight and his followers. It also followed last week's dispatch of 100 troops and four Blackhawk helicopter gunships to join the 1,500 Australian troops spearheading the UN occupation of East Timor. The Blackhawks are participating in a belligerent new offensive against Jakarta-backed militia operating out of Indonesian West Timor.

For the past two weeks the *Tobruk*, anchored off the Solomon Islands capital of Honiara, has been the venue of Australian-supervised talks between the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) and the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM). The Howard government put renewed pressure on the rival militias by announcing that the ship would depart this week if no deal were finalised.

Under the agreement, due to come into effect today, a Ceasefire Monitoring Council, appointed by the Solomons government, the MEF and the IFM, will

have the power to call in Australian or other overseas peace-monitors. Downer quickly indicated the Howard government's willingness to contribute military personnel. He also offered to convene the next round of talks in the northern Australian city of Cairns.

The two militias have agreed to temporarily lay down their arms for 90 days. Each group will maintain control of the areas it currently occupies, although the MEF will allow the shattered police force to resume operations in Honiara. Further talks are meant to take place within seven days.

Earlier talks collapsed last weekend when three IFM commanders, George Gray, Harold Keke and Joseph Sangu, failed to attend for the third time. The trio later delegated IFM spokesperson Henry Tobani to act on their behalf, but still refused to join the signing ceremony.

During the stalled talks the MEF launched "Operation Eagle Storm," an offensive aimed at extending the area around Honiara under its control. The previous week, the IFM, which controls the surrounding rural areas of the main island of Guadalcanal, cut off Honiara's main water supply. A humanitarian disaster was only avoided because Honiara has been largely depopulated.

Sporadic fighting has continued for months between the two groups, marked by atrocities on both sides. On July 10, MEF gunmen killed two injured IFM members in their hospital beds. At least 60 people have been killed since the conflict began 20 months ago. In mid-1999 IFM violence forced 20,000 Malaitans to flee Guadalcanal. Amid widespread unemployment and poverty, the Malaitans were accused of taking land and jobs away from Guadalcanal people.

Far from having any concern for the welfare and democratic rights of the Solomons' people, however,

the Howard government has intervened to protect Australia's considerable business and strategic interests in the small but sprawling island country, which stretches from Papua New Guinea to Vanuatu. The Solomons' intervention marks a new bellicose assertion of Australian hegemony over the South Pacific region that Australian governments have long regarded as their particular sphere of influence.

Australian companies have substantial investments in the Solomons. Australian-controlled Delta Gold owns the sole gold mine, which was shut down a few days after the MEF seized power in Honiara on June 5. Australian-owned Westpac, ANZ and QBE Insurance dominate banking and insurance. Major Australian investments include the King Solomon and Gizo hotels, and Fielder Industries, a subsidiary of Goodman Fielder. With British American Tobacco, an Australian company jointly owns the Solomon Islands Tobacco Company.

The new Solomon Islands Prime Minister, Manessah Sogavare, recently installed under Australian supervision, appears to be doing the bidding of Australia and the other Western powers. His strategy document, titled "Peace Plan 2000," advocates slashing the public service, further privatisation of state-owned assets and land reform to enable more secure mining and logging investment. These policies, dictated by the International Monetary Fund, will further cut the living standards of workers and villagers.

A new budget will also be announced by the end of next week to deal with the collapse of government revenue. A report broadcast by the state-owned radio station suggested that the government should save money by closing all its schools, reducing the salaries of teachers or sending them on unpaid leave. The financing of 230 Solomon Islanders studying at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji is under review.

In addition, Sogavare has floated a proposal to establish a Defence Force for the first time in the country's 22-year history. He claimed that gun-wielding members of the two factions would be incorporated into an army that could be used for reconstruction activities as well as military purposes.

The economic pressure on the government intensified when the country's largest commercial fishing company decided to suspend its fishing operations last weekend, threatening the jobs of 2,000 employees. The Japanese-

owned Solomon Taiyo Limited made the announcement following the hijacking of one of its fishing boats by three armed men. Tourism, another key source of revenue and employment, had already stopped completely. Limited commercial flights to the Solomons only resumed last week when the government leased a plane from Air Vanuatu.



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