

Another Australian warship sails to the Solomon Islands

Peter Byrne**25 September 2000**

Australian Defence Minister John Moore announced on September 18 that another Australian warship, the *HMAS Newcastle*, had set sail for the Solomon Islands. It is the third Australian naval ship sent to the tiny South Pacific country since June 5, when an ethnic militia group, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), seized the capital Honiara and ousted the government of Bartholomew Ulufa'alu.

On its arrival, the *Newcastle* replaced a New Zealand naval frigate as the venue for talks between the leaders of the MEF and their rivals in the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM). The Australian government will convene a further meeting of the warring militias in the northern Australian city of Cairns, beginning in the first week of October.

These moves underscore the lengths to which Australia and New Zealand, the major economic powers in the South-West Pacific, are going to re-establish a secure environment for their substantial mining, tourism and financial investments in the impoverished state. So far, the efforts have been in vain.

The past month has been characterised by stop-start talks and ongoing bloodshed between the two militias. In the first week of August a ceasefire was signed aboard the Australian warship, *HMAS Tobruk*. Almost immediately, however, hostilities resumed. A member of the MEF was gunned down on August 8, allegedly by IFM members.

Following the departure of the *Tobruk*, a New Zealand frigate, *Te Kaha*, was dispatched to host renewed talks, arriving in Honiara on August 24. Initially, the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation painted a rosy picture of these negotiations. Speakers from all sides issued formal apologies and pleas for peace. Guadalcanal Province

Premier Ezekiel Alebua, who was a key figure last year in whipping up IFM supporters to drive 20,000 ethnic Malaitans from the main island of Guadalcanal, stated that "true peace can only come from a heart free of hatred".

Despite the conciliatory tone, nothing of any substance was achieved. The IFM and MEF leaders agreed that changes had to be made to the structure of the government and to land laws but they could not agree on disarmament, compensation payments and an amnesty. Lawyers from both factions are still considering these issues.

Almost immediately following the talks, a faction of the IFM hijacked an aircraft and demanded SI\$2 million in ransom. The IFM is demanding the disarming of the MEF, which still controls Honiara, and the lifting of MEF roadblocks that prevent supplies reaching the rural areas of Guadalcanal, where the IFM dominates. The IFM leaders said they had lost trust in National Unity, Reconciliation and Peace Minister Allan Kemakeza. Last month, the IFM kidnapped Kemakeza's brother.

The situation in and around Honiara remains volatile, with occasional gun battles between rival MEF factions and numerous reports of looting and robbery by armed gangs. Ordinary people face shortages of most essential items and government services have ground to a halt. MEF members at the airport confiscated medical supplies bound for an outlying area of Guadalcanal.

Most major industries have closed and official revenue has largely collapsed. The current government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare has said it will place 1,000 public servants on indefinite unpaid leave. They will be given SI\$2,000 and sent back to their villages to engage in subsistence farming.

In a move that shows the government's fragility, the

Director of Government Communications has announced that all media coverage relating to the crisis will be subject to censorship. He said “untimely” information would be withheld in the interests of “public safety and national security”.

The disintegration of basic services has also set in train forces that could lead to the country's break-up. One of the IFM's demands is for statehood for the Guadalcanal Province. Two other provinces, Western and Choiseul, declared themselves states on July 7. Temotu followed suit on August 7.

The establishment of state governments with powers to collect revenue and control resource development has the potential to further loosen the existing lax official controls, providing a bonanza for the mining and logging companies. Various commercial interests have been accused of backing the fighting over the past two years.

There are nine provinces in the Solomon Islands, which has a population of only 400,000. Temotu, which borders Vanuatu, has just 25,000 people. The Western Province, with 60,000 people, borders Bougainville, where secessionists have long demanded separation from Papua New Guinea. Western Province leaders have given the Solomons Island government one year to recognise their statehood, or they will declare independence. Companies seeking to exploit local natural resources could easily dominate such tiny territories with so few people.

Reports have emerged of lucrative payments being made to various parties to the ongoing conflict. Andrew Nori, an ex-politician and lawyer who acts as spokesperson for the MEF, has reportedly been paid SI\$113,000 by the government for services provided to the MEF. While the government claims it has no money for basic health and education services, large sums are being found to pay members of a tiny ruling elite.

Nori has lodged a SI\$200 million (US\$40 million) compensation claim for Malaitans displaced by the IFM last year. To date, the government has paid more than SI\$24 million. The government has also paid 200 MEF members a total of SI\$500,000 to return to the island of Malaita.

The cash-strapped government is seeking aid from any source. It has been accused of attempting to blackmail Taiwan into handing over SI\$710 million in

return for continued diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. Sogavare has denied the allegation, as well as the suggestion that an Australian businessman was authorised to negotiate on his behalf. Other reports have claimed that Beijing has offered the Solomons SI\$675 million to drop the links with Taiwan.

En route to the recent UN Millennium Summit, the Solomon Islands delegation held talks in Taipei. At the UN meeting, the speech delivered on Sogavare's behalf pleaded for more aid funding and for Taiwan to be admitted to the UN.

Taipei's efforts to win favour in the region are a sore point in Canberra, which has long regarded the South Pacific as Australia's sphere of influence. Last year, Papua New Guinea's recognition of Taiwan became a factor in the Australian-backed replacement of PNG prime minister Bill Skate.

Speaking at a recent Australian Defence Force conference in Canberra to discuss the turmoil in the South Pacific, following the coups in Fiji and the Solomons, Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer played down the prospect of military intervention.

Downer emphasised the aid given to the Solomons—A\$15 million annually. In reality it is a small price to pay for a huge trade surplus, not to mention the profits from projects such as the Delta Gold mine. In 1998 Australia's exports to the Solomon Islands totalled A\$101 million. Imports totalled a mere A\$3 million.

Writing in the *Australian*, Mary-Louise O'Callaghan took issue with Downer's caution on military involvement. Her article, titled “A Pacific insecurity risk,” posed the question: “For if Canberra is not prepared to be the bottom line, who is?”

While the Howard government has ruled out direct military engagement for now, even in the form of a “peacekeeping force,” the ethnic leaders on whom it is relying to restore stability are proving to have a limited ability to control the social forces that they have set loose.



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