

Signs of disintegration in Papua New Guinea security forces

A correspondent
17 October 2000

So far this year two of the three largest island nations in the South Pacific have become engulfed in political turmoil. Both the attempted coup in Fiji and the ousting of the government in the Solomons have exposed the advanced state of decay in the state structures of these countries. In the former, an elite anti-terrorist group was involved in taking the entire government hostage; in the latter the police force collapsed with its members defecting to rival ethnic-based militia gangs.

Comments by Prime Minister Mekere Morauta last week in Papua New Guinea (PNG)—the largest Pacific Island nation—reveal that things are similar there. “Overseas, including within our own region, there is growing instability,” he said. “At home we are trying to cope with a legacy of economic, social and political turmoil... unfortunately, we have varying degrees of breakdown in all three services.”

The prime minister announced that his government had endorsed the findings of a taskforce review of the armed forces set up in March after disgruntled soldiers took to the streets of Port Moresby to protest about living conditions at the Murray and Taurama barracks. While most of the review has been kept secret, it concluded that the armed forces no longer had the capacity to defend the country's national interests or to adequately look after the basic needs of its personnel. Management structures and systems were either “not appropriate or not working”.

The review found that soldiers were paid late, did not receive outstanding entitlements, and sometimes lacked food. Sleeping quarters and uniforms were in short supply. Some soldiers were not housed because hundreds had been discharged but still had outstanding claims. As well, some off-duty soldiers had apparently become involved in criminal or “raskol” gangs.

An incident last month gives some indication of the breakdown of discipline and the level of tensions between different sections of the security forces.

In the early hours of September 23, police in Port Moresby killed an off-duty soldier, Private Bernard Gausi, 24, who had allegedly been involved in a robbery. As the news spread, soldiers from Port Moresby's two main barracks—Taurama and Murray—demonstrated outside the Boroko police headquarters. About 100 soldiers recovered Gausi's body from the Port Moresby General Hospital morgue and displayed it at the police station, demanding an explanation. A police car was set on fire as soldiers surrounded the station, throwing rocks and firing weapons at random.

Police fired off a full magazine of machine gun rounds over the soldiers' heads to stop them invading the police station to get at the officers responsible for the death. The soldiers ran away, but later 500 returned to confront police. Rocks hit Port Moresby Metropolitan Police Commander, Chief Superintendent John Marru and the Boroko police commander, Chief Superintendent Tom Kilunga, as they tried to negotiate with the soldiers. Soldiers later held a sit-down protest in the Boroko shopping precinct. The PNG cabinet met and ordered a coronial inquest into Gausi's death.

On September 24, Brigadier-General Carl Marlpo ordered all troops to return to their barracks: “All servicemen must refrain from any further action at this time. I want the commanding officers and unit commanders to take their men home and not come to the streets to try to take the law into their hands. That is my direction to everyone in the force here in Port Moresby.”

Parliament was placed under heavy police guard on September 25 as Speaker Bernard Narokobi adjourned a session for lack of a quorum. Only 32 of the 107 members attended the sitting due to rumours that angry soldiers would march to the parliament to present a petition to the government.

The soldiers claim that Gausi was bashed to death. A PNG Defence Force medical officer told the *Post Courier*

newspaper that Gausi appeared to have been beaten and kicked. A gunshot wound on the man's left arm did not appear sufficiently serious to have caused his death—the likely cause was internal bleeding following a beating. “From the time I picked up the body I found the marks of boots on these body parts.”

Police have promised a full investigation into the shooting. They insist that Gausi was part of a “raskol” (criminal) gang that broke into a family's home near Taurama Barracks, robbed the occupants and stole a vehicle. They allege that he was shot dead during a pursuit. In addition, they say that Gausi was due to appear in court on a previous charge of attempted murder.

Contradicting the military's account, and armed with the post mortem results, metropolitan police chief John Marru said the cause of death was a single shotgun wound. Marru said one bullet had entered Gausi's left shoulder, penetrating his left lung and ending up in his right lung.

This incident is not the first serious outbreak of dissension within the security forces this year. Only one week earlier, during Independence Day celebrations, soldiers at Moem Barracks near Wewak went on a rampage and set fire to buildings. They were angry that their mess had closed and no food was available.

The situation within the police force is just as bad. According to the *Post Courier*: “Until the public can be reassured that the RPNGC [police force], is doing everything it can to cut down on violence, drunkenness, and corruption within its own ranks, the level of cooperation with police will remain abysmal.”

A coroner's inquest is underway into the deaths of five men who attempted to rob a Port Moresby bank last December. Witnesses have given clear evidence that several of the men were killed after they surrendered. Five other current murder investigations in Port Moresby involve allegations against police. In two of the cases, serving police officers have been charged.

Adding to the volatility is the fact that weaponry from the army and the police has found its way into urban and rural areas over the past decade. A fatal hand grenade attack in Port Moresby last week—the third of its kind in the past year—led PNG's Police Commissioner John Wakon to urge people to hand in to the police any grenades they have in their possession.

The unrest in the security forces is not simply a product of poor pay and conditions, but reflects broader political and social instability. Political life is dominated by loosely-knit factions and short-lived alliances aimed at taking power for the benefit of their own business and

political backers, and to satisfy the parochial needs of their own constituencies. The rivalries have increasingly embroiled the police and the military, undermining their ability to serve the broader national interests of the ruling class and corroding the morale and discipline of their members.

In 1997, a protest movement involving sections of the army forced Prime Minister Julius Chan to resign after it was revealed that he had hired mercenaries from Sandline International to fight against the separatist Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). Chan turned to Sandline after PNG Defence Forces had been defeated by the BRA in several attempts to regain control of Bougainville and its huge Panguna copper mine. Chan's plans cut across those of Australia and New Zealand, which had concluded from the army's defeats that it was necessary to strike a deal with the BRA to end the war.

Opposition politicians working closely with Defence Forces chief Brigadier General Jerry Singirok exploited widespread popular resentment over the impact of Chan's economic policies to stir up protests against “corruption” and the Sandline revelations. Singirok issued a 48-hour deadline for Chan to resign then refused to stand down when Chan sacked him. At the high point of the crisis, thousands of students, unemployed, civil servants, workers and soldiers surrounded the parliament building, forcing Chan and his colleagues to flee in disguise.

Singirok was not disciplined over what amounted to a mutiny, but rather over claims that he had been involved in taking money from the British-based military supply company J & S Franklin. Under previous prime minister Bill Skate, he was even reinstated as head of the Defence Forces. The entire affair revealed the degree to which the armed forces and the police have become vehicles for regional, sectional and individual interests. The latest series of incidents, and Mekere's remarks, indicate that the internal rot is deepening.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact