

Solomon Islands peace agreement entrenches ethnic divisions

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After six days of talks in the northern Australian city of Townsville last week, rival ethnic militia leaders from the Solomon Islands signed an agreement to temporarily disarm in return for promises of separate economic development.

In order to convene the unprecedented offshore meeting, the Australian government flew 130 delegates in Air Force Hercules aircraft to Townsville's Garbutt Air Force base. The talks, which began on October 10, were meant to last four days, but when no agreement was forthcoming the delegates were kept in Australia until a deal was finally struck.

Before the meeting opened, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer personally warned the delegates that if the talks failed the Solomons would disintegrate. In a subsequent radio interview he declared: "The Solomon Islands is very much on the brink.... Its economy has plunged. Its exports have largely disappeared. We are very anxious that this peace process can proceed successfully."

One of the sticking points was acceptance of an International Peace Monitoring Team, in which Australia will play the leading role. While other Pacific nations may participate in the unarmed force, most of the personnel—50 to 100—will come from Australia, with a smaller contingent from New Zealand. They are expected to arrive within a month and are due to remain for an initial two-year period.

As a result, Australia is now involved in a record three peacekeeping operations in the immediate Asia-Pacific region. It has 1,700 troops in East Timor and about 150 military and police monitors on the Papua New Guinea island of Bougainville, which is adjacent to the Solomons.

Previously, the Howard government had ruled out committing troops to the Solomons, but faced an

unravelling situation in the heart of the South-west Pacific, which Canberra regards as its sphere of influence. Three visits by Australian and New Zealand naval ships to host truce negotiations had failed to halt the fighting, in which more than 70 people have been killed and thousands driven from their homes. Six previous peace agreements arranged through the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Solomon Island government between June 1999 and May 12 this year had collapsed.

The conflict erupted in late 1998, when the "Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army," later renamed the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), drove some 20,000 Malaitan island settlers from the rural areas of Guadalcanal, the main island. The capital, Honiara, situated on Guadalcanal, became an enclave for non-Guadalcanalese surrounded by the IFM-controlled countryside.

On June 5 this year, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), which included sections of the paramilitary police force, took over Honiara and forced Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu to resign. Open warfare broke out between the IFM and the MEF. The Australian government evacuated most of its citizens and all major industries shut down, bringing the economy to a grinding halt. Honiara's population dropped from 50,000 to around 20,000, electricity was rationed because the generating authority did not pay its fuel bill, and the IFM blew up the water treatment plant.

The Townsville Peace Agreement institutionalises the resulting ethnic divisions. IFM and MEF members will be repatriated to their home villages, and their arms will be stockpiled on their home islands, under the monitoring team's supervision. In return for handing in their weapons within 30 days, militia members will enjoy a general amnesty and immunity from

prosecution. All members of the paramilitary police force who participated in the MEF coup will be reinstated, and the force will be restructured along ethnic lines.

The Constitution will be rewritten to grant Malaita and Guadalcanal provinces statehood or greater autonomy “in order to allow the people of Malaita and Guadalcanal to look after their own affairs”. The newly-empowered governments will have jurisdiction over land ownership and distribution, including the power to negate previous land purchases, including those made by Malaitans on Guadalcanal.

The agreement promises that both islands will be granted a wish list of development projects. Malaita will receive its own international airport, a fisheries centre, a new port, a new road and tourist facilities. The National Provident Fund will be carved up to create a separate Malaita Provident Fund. These plans are in line with the demands of the MEF, led by lawyer Andrew Nori, that Malaita be freed to compete with Guadalcanal for investment projects.

The Solomon Island government has pledged to establish public works programs to employ all militia members. In addition, “the Solomon Islands government shall immediately take steps to improve the capacity of health and educational services in Malaita and Guadalcanal provinces”.

But no money exists to provide such facilities. The Solomon Islands, with a population of less than 500,000 people spread over six main islands and some 340 small islands and tiny atolls, is now bankrupt. Despite the agreement, no cash pledges have been forthcoming from the Howard government, which previously cut off all aid until a truce was signed.

Over the past few weeks the Solomons media has been dominated by the government's attempts to secure funds by playing off the rivalry between Beijing and Taipei. The government is one of only 29 in the world that diplomatically recognises Taiwan, but Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare has declared that he will recognise Beijing in return for US\$200 million.

In the midst of the Townsville talks, Foreign Minister Danny Philip broke an appointment with Taiwanese Vice Foreign Minister Wu Tze-dan in Brisbane and abruptly flew to Beijing. Sogavare initially denounced Philip and threatened to sack him, but later endorsed the mission, saying that Taiwan lacked the necessary

funds.

In September the fisheries ministry signed a deal in Taipei, giving 42 licenses to Taiwanese big eye tuna fishing boats for \$3,000 per boat per year. The previous rate was \$8,000. This provoked a sharp reaction within the Australian media. The *Australian's* Marie Louise O'Callaghan denounced Taiwan as the “world's most voracious fishing nation” and expressed concern for the “destruction of the [Solomons'] sustainable marine resources”.

O'Callaghan and other commentators have for months been demanding more decisive intervention by the Howard government in the Solomons, where Australian business interests are prominent. Significantly, in Townsville, IFM representatives also held talks with the Australian owners of Guadalcanal's Gold Ridge gold mine, which has been shut down by the fighting. The IFM leaders reportedly assured the mine owners that they could now safely resume operations.

Similar local deals can be expected in other provinces, adding to the centrifugal pressures on the Solomons, which has 70 different languages. Apart from Malaita and Guadalcanal, none of the country's other seven provincial governments were party to the Townsville accord and the Western province, closest to Bougainville, refused to even attend the talks.

Granted formal independence by Britain in 1978, the Solomon Islands has always been impoverished and weak, and its plight worsened after the 1997 Asian financial meltdown, which resulted in the collapse of commodity export prices, particularly for timber, and the imposition of debt reduction measures.

Far from resolving any of the problems confronting the ordinary people of the Solomons, the Townsville agreement is primarily designed to defend Australia's economic and strategic interests. Australian-controlled and other corporations will now seek to protect their operations, in partnership with one ethnic elite or another.



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