

Week-long military revolt shakes Papua New Guinea government

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The position of the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government remains precarious after a tense week-long standoff in the capital of Port Moresby with hundreds of rebellious troops. The soldiers have reportedly agreed today to end their mutiny and hand back weapons after Prime Minister Mekere Morauta withdrew the government's proposed defence force restructuring plan and promised an unconditional amnesty to those involved.

The revolt began on March 14, when around 100 soldiers at Murray Barracks, the PNG Defence Force headquarters, forced their way into the armoury and took automatic weapons. Their concerns focused on the government's plans to implement the findings of a Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group (EPG) report calling for a major revamp of the country's military. The EPG was set up in response to concerns, in Australia in particular, about previous outbreaks of rebellion in the PNG Defence Forces.

The government had endorsed the report the previous week but details of its proposals were not made available to the public or to the army's ranks. What was known was that the EPG had recommended that the number of soldiers be drastically slashed from 4,150 to 1,900 and that the Murray Barracks, among others, be sold off. According to military spokesmen, the rebel soldiers seized the armoury after rumours spread that those pensioned off were to receive only 10,000 kina and that 700 Australian troops, including paratroopers and SAS units, were due to land in Port Moresby to supervise the changes.

While Morauta set up negotiations with the rebels and attempted to play down the situation, the mutiny quickly became the focus for discontent among other troops and broader layers of the population with government policies. Over the weekend, troops from the nearby Taurama and Goldie River Barracks joined the rebellion and by early this week rebel soldiers had seized around 1,000 automatic weapons, grenade launchers, mortars and 30,000 rounds of ammunition. Local newspapers reported that student leaders, trade union officials and non-government groups approached the troops for talks.

Much of the hostility among the soldiers, which is driven by longstanding grievances over the failure to be properly equipped, paid and, in some cases, even fed, appears to be unfocused. A non-commissioned officer complained to the press that "the big men" in parliament were becoming millionaires overnight. "We see corruption everywhere. People say, 'ah, I am going to nominate for Parliament. In three or five years I will be a millionaire'. All they do is put the people's money in their pockets and the grassroots get nothing."

Among some layers, however, definite political demands have been voiced. An unnamed officer from Taurama Barracks told the *Post Courier* on March 16 that the main issue was not rumours about Australian troops or the retrenchment package but "the government

being influenced by the World Bank... They [the soldiers] want this government to go at all costs. Nothing more, Nothing less. And they are prepared to shed blood to see this government go," he said.

In an attempt to stem the mounting threat to his fragile government, Morauta announced on March 17 that his government was unconditionally withdrawing its support for the EPG recommendations. He said he was doing so to prevent the dispute with the rebel troops from becoming "politicised."

Morauta, a merchant banker and former PNG Reserve Bank governor, came to power in 1999 with the tacit backing of the Australian government after the previous prime minister Bill Skate was forced from office. His government re-established relations with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and set about implementing their economic restructuring demands, including sweeping privatisations and cutbacks to government spending. But Morauta has come under increasing fire from Skate and also former prime minister Michael Somare, who was sacked as foreign minister last December, and has closed the national parliament until June in order to avoid a no-confidence motion.

The government provoked widespread disgust last month by overturning a decision of the country's wages board to increase the minimum weekly wage of rural workers to 60 kina (about \$US18). At the same time, the media leaked details of a decision by the Salaries and Remuneration Commission to boost the salaries of parliamentarians by between 60 to 100 percent. But with the kina at near record lows and the World Bank holding up the latest tranche of its loan, Morauta is under huge pressure to press ahead with restructuring despite his growing unpopularity.

Melee at Murray Barracks

Morauta's decision to withdraw support for the EPG report failed to quell the rebellion by the troops. On March 20, hundreds of soldiers gathered at Murray Barracks expecting to be given a personal assurance from the prime minister that the changes would not go ahead. When the troops found that Morauta had sent Defence Minister Kilroy Genia in his place, they began chanting "prime minister, prime minister" and rushed the stage, forcing the assembled dignitaries to retreat. Several journalists were assaulted in the process.

On the same day, thousands of university students marched on the prime minister's office protesting against the government's economic policies which have severely affected education and other social services. They called for the removal of the government, an end to the IMF-World Bank restructuring program and the appointment of a caretaker administration until elections are held.

At this stage, soldiers have rebuffed appeals by student leaders to join them in the streets and have confined their protests to the

barracks. Undoubtedly Morauta fears a repetition of the events of early 1997 when soldiers protesting against the planned use of Sandline International mercenaries on Bougainville joined demonstrations by students, unemployed youth and workers in Port Moresby and Lae. As a result, the government of prime minister Julius Chan was brought down. Morauta was among the opposition politicians who supported the army revolt, setting a precedent for the present situation.

The prime minister refused to meet personally with rebel troops but has made a series of further overtures in a bid to end the crisis. Following the March 20 fracas at Murray Barracks, he offered a full amnesty for all soldiers involved in the revolt. He has also sent a letter to the soldiers apologising for the “misunderstanding” that he would be personally present at the meeting and undertaking to present any grievances to cabinet. Any future changes to the military, he promised, “would be completely home-grown. There will be no outside influences whatsoever.”

The rebel troops demanded that the prime minister provide them with a pledge “in black and white” that the defence force downsizing was off the agenda and meet with them to accept a list of their grievances. Petitions were circulated not only among defence personnel in Port Moresby but also at the Moem Barracks in Wewak, in the Air Transport Wing, the Navy and Igam Barracks in Lae. Negotiations between representatives of the government and soldiers today appear to have reached a deal to end the confrontation.

A number of opposition politicians have seized on the crisis to oppose the EPG report and call for the reconvening of parliament—a move that would undoubtedly produce a bid to oust Morauta. People's Progress Party leader Michael Nali, a former member of Morauta's cabinet, has said that the government was rushing to implement the EPG report without due consideration for PNG's “national interest and pride”. He said that the changes to the army were “part of Sir Mekere's drive for institutional reform and strengthening as supported by the World Bank.”

Former PNG Defence Force commander and now Central MP Ted Diro warned politicians to stay out of the present confrontation with soldiers. At the same time, however, he criticised the government's “bad handling” of the defence restructuring and condemned the EPG report as “farcical” for its failure to make a detailed analysis of the potential threats to PNG.

Diro's comments reflect the sentiments of layers of the military top brass, who are clearly sympathetic to the rebel soldiers without openly supporting them. Last week acting PNG Defence Force Commander, Brigadier-General Karl Marlopo, complained that the military hierarchy had not been consulted by the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group and that he still did not have a copy of their report. The EPG included Major-General Michael Jeffrey from Australia and former New Zealand defence department head Gerard Hensley.

The reaction in Australia

The Howard government in Australia has reacted to the political crisis in Port Moresby with growing alarm. Canberra was instrumental in pushing for the restructuring of the PNG Defence and was to provide \$10 million towards the cost of implementing the findings of the EPG report. As the former colonial power with substantial economic interests in PNG, Australia was deeply concerned at the growing signs of disintegration in the PNG military—particularly in light of the coup attempt in Fiji last May and the collapse of the Solomon Islands government amid inter-ethnic fighting.

Allowing for the usually muted character of diplomatic language

reinforced by the need to not further inflame already strong anti-Australian sentiment among PNG soldiers, the statements from Prime Minister John Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer over the last week amount to a blunt warning that Australia is prepared to intervene to shore up the government.

Last weekend, Howard commented: “We have to respect the sovereignty of that country, but... we would be extremely disturbed to say the least, if there were any challenge to the constitutionally-elected government.” He telephoned Morauta to offer him support and indicated that the Australian government was following the situation in Port Moresby closely.

Speaking from London, Downer expressed concern over the army revolt and warned that PNG faced international sanctions if the government were overthrown. “[I]f some people in the military think they can act beyond the constitution of Papua New Guinea, then that is something that will generate outrage in the international community—including Australia—and it would certainly not be in the interests of those people in Papua New Guinea to go down that path.”

Downer refused to comment on “hypothetic situations” or the possibility of Australian military intervention in PNG. But neither did he rule it out. Australian troops are currently part of a “peace-keeping” force in the PNG province of Bougainville, as part of ceasefire arrangements to end the long-running civil war on the island.

Comments in the Australian newspapers following this week's riot by soldiers at Murray Barracks were even more forthright. An editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* lamented the fact that Morauta had been forced to back away from the defence restructuring which “would set a bad precedent beyond PNG.” “But if local security forces are wound back,” the newspaper concluded, “Australia is likely to find itself called upon more often to help out in the event of civil disturbances.”

The *Australian* editorial commented: “The latest military rebellion is nothing less than a catastrophe for PNG and has exposed the paucity of Australia's regional diplomacy. The PNG Defence Force has proven again that it is a law unto itself and Australia's neglect of our defence relationship is partly to blame... If the rebellion were to escalate it could lead to a serious deterioration of law and order. The stakes for Australia couldn't be higher. Billions of dollars worth of investment and the livelihood and safety of thousands of Australian nationals living in PNG could be jeopardised... From promising order and hope, Sir Mekere's legacy looks increasingly like being marked by chaos and despair.”

The obvious conclusion that is being drawn—if not in so many words—is that the government has to be far more aggressive in its diplomatic, economic, and if need be, military interventions in the region to defend Australian imperialist interests.



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