

Papua New Guinea government under siege after police kill three protesters

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29 June 2001

The Papua New Guinea government faces continuing unrest following the police killing of at least three anti-government protesters on Tuesday night. In an attempt to contain further student-led demonstrations, Sir Mekere Morauta's government has imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew throughout Port Moresby until July 10, but it is far from being in full control of the situation.

Students are demanding answers about the police actions and sections of workers are on strike. The trade union leaders have felt compelled to call a national stoppage. Schools and government offices, as well as many shops and businesses, are starting to reopen after a week of protests led by University of PNG students against the government's plans—dictated by the IMF and World Bank—to privatise nearly all public enterprises.

There is widespread outrage over the unprecedented gunning down of protesters. For the first time since PNG independence in 1975, heavily-armed riot squad members opened fire with live ammunition on demonstrators after using tear gas and automatic gunfire bursts into the air to break up a five-day sit-in at the central government offices. The death toll is likely to rise because another 18 people were shot and some were critically injured, including a female worker and a 10-year-old boy.

When news of the shootings spread throughout the town and its surrounding squatter camps on Wednesday, between 5,000 and 10,000 people joined angry protests, many of them converging on the main military barracks to appeal for support from the troops. A group of 60 soldiers defied the orders of their commanders to remain inside the barracks, marching with heads bowed to express remorse over the deaths. The symbolic gesture was a reminder of the events in March, when soldiers seized weapons and staged a 12-day revolt over the government's IMF measures and its plans to drastically slash the armed forces.

The government's National Executive Council has issued a call-out order to the armed forces to assist the police if need be, but the government is not confident that it can rely on the troops. In a nervous statement, Acting Defence Force Commander Brigadier General Carl Marlpo has urged the public not to solicit military support for the student-led protests. "Soldiers must strictly adhere to the force's directive that was recently issued to all members of the PNGDF. That is—not to take part in the protest."

Revealing its deep concerns over the unstable situation in Australia's former colony, the Howard government in Canberra moved quickly to bolster and offer assistance to Morauta's administration. Prime Minister John Howard phoned Morauta to express his support and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer warned against giving in to the demonstrations. "If Papua New Guinea stumbles and the reform program is abandoned, it will be a disaster for the Papua New Guinea economy and it will be a disaster for the people of Papua New Guinea. It is very important that people in Papua New Guinea understand the consequences of the failure of the reform program".

Until the police violence on Tuesday night, students had led five days of peaceful but determined sit-in protests and marches against the

government's economic plans, involving more than 1,000 people each day. The demonstrations by the students, who come from all regions of the country, became the focus for wider discontent with the unemployment, poverty and slum conditions that dominate the life of PNG's people, particularly the youth.

The student demonstrations developed last week as workers were staging a three-day strike at the PNG Banking Corporation, demanding job security. The planned privatisation of the bank and all other major government enterprises, including PNG Telecom, Post PNG and Air Niugini, will inevitably destroy thousands of jobs.

Students first met at the university on June 18 to discuss a public campaign to oppose the IMF measures and the proposed changes to land laws, which will require all customary or communal land to be registered so that it can be leased or mortgaged for corporate exploitation. After voting to boycott classes and seek wider support, they marched to the central government offices near the parliament on June 20 to demand that Morauta receive their four-point petition.

The petition called for the government to resign if it did not halt the privatisation of national assets and land registration, expel IMF and World Bank officials and end all borrowings from the bank. These demands are very similar to those issued by the rebel troops in March, except that the soldiers also called for the expulsion of all Australian diplomats and military advisers.

When Morauta refused to meet the students, they decided to camp outside his office until he did so. By last Friday, most of the capital was shut down, with government offices blocked and no bus services operating. Morauta attempted unsuccessfully to turn popular opinion against the students by denouncing them as the stooges of unnamed politicians, "thieves" and others with "personal agendas" who were "handing out large sums of money" to pay and feed protesters.

Over the weekend, the protesters refused to leave the government complex, defying police armed with M16s and tear gas guns. On at least one occasion, several police personnel refused to obey orders to fire tear gas canisters into the crowd. Students also marched to the Australian High Commission, holding placards denouncing the Australian government's backing for the IMF program. Chants of "Australia out" demonstrated the considerable antagonism felt toward the former colonial rulers.

Having failed to disperse the protesters, Morauta made a direct appeal to them. On Monday afternoon, accompanied by 11 cabinet ministers, he addressed the demonstration, received the students' petition and promised to consider their demands within the 24-hour deadline that they set him. But when students refused to end their sit-in, the government unleashed the police against them.

Reinforced by riot squads flown in from East New Britain and the Highlands, police waited until late on Monday night when numbers at the demonstration had dwindled, then attacked the students and pursued them as they fled toward the university. Once news of the police violence spread to the squatter settlements around Port Moresby many more people

became involved in running battles with police. Gunfire erupted in the early hours of Tuesday morning as a large police contingent tried to force students back into the university grounds.

Initially, a police superintendent denied that the police were responsible for the deaths, but a reporter from the *PNGvillage* web site witnessed the police shooting. The following day, Morauta defended the police actions, declaring: "There can be no room for patience and understanding of acts of organised violence against people and property. The rule of law must prevail."

Throughout Wednesday police clashed with people from the squatter settlements, who, having heard about the shootings, streamed into the university and government area, in some cases looting, stoning and burning businesses. Police baton-charged about 1,000 people who had gathered outside Port Moresby General Hospital, demanding the release of the three dead students' bodies in order to march with them to parliament to demand the government's resignation.

These actions only seemed to provoke wider anger. Some workers walked off the job, including Maritime Workers Union members in the northern town of Lae, who halted one of the country's busiest ports.

So explosive was the situation that the *National* newspaper felt compelled to appeal to authorities to rein in the police: "We appeal also to the law enforcers. Stop using heavy-handed tactics. Yesterday, many citizens were assaulted by police. This kind of treatment only causes anger. Violence begets violence. Before police started using rubber bullets, the student protest was peaceful."

Trade union leaders and opposition politicians have called for Morauta's resignation, blaming him for not acting more swiftly to resolve the protests. Official opposition leader and former prime minister Bill Skate said: "The man has to see some common sense and step aside to set up a commission of inquiry to clear his name."

Trade Union Congress general secretary John Paska told reporters that Morauta should resign because he had failed to immediately address the issues raised by the students. Paska said the unions had little choice but to call a strike against "acts of aggression on a civilian population, seemingly condoned by the government". He described the killings as an over-reaction. "It was completely unprovoked. They were just a bunch of thugs chasing unarmed students in their own yard and shooting them like hunters."

In a bid to defuse the situation, Police Minister Jimson Sauk announced an inquiry into the student demonstrations and the police shootings, but attempted to justify the police actions. The country's economy was in a crucial state, he said, and the "unprecedented uprising" was having a detrimental effect on foreign investor confidence.

While fighting for its immediate political survival, the Morauta government is also under severe pressure from the international financial institutions. It cannot meet any of the student demands without incurring the wrath of global investment markets.

Morauta, a merchant banker, came to power in 1999, backed by Australia on the basis that he would restore relations with the IMF and World Bank, which had broken down under his predecessor, Skate. Morauta pledged to implement the IMF-World Bank blueprint in return for badly needed loans.

Earlier this month, however, the latest \$US200 million instalment was withheld because the government had not completed the sale of the national bank, the first of the privatisation deadlines set by the international agencies. As a result, the government has a K178 million budget deficit, international investment has continued to plunge and the currency, the kina, has remained at near record lows.

In Western circles and among PNG's financial elite, Morauta has been regarded as the last hope of pushing through the requirements of the financial institutions. As Mary-Louise O'Callaghan noted in the *Australian* on Thursday: "Within and without, Sir Mekere was seen as the

country's last chance. He quickly moved to re-engage the confidence of international donors, by then the cash-strapped country's only way out of an economic abyss."

Every measure taken by the government to carry out the IMF-World Bank program, however, including the military downsizing and the overturning of a minimum wage rise in February, has provoked popular hostility. Late last year, Morauta shut down parliament for seven months in order to avoid a no-confidence motion. With parliament scheduled to reopen next month, the government's future appears highly uncertain.

In recent weeks, various opposition politicians have sought to exploit the growing anti-government sentiment by posturing as opponents of the privatisation program. Among them is former prime minister, Sir Michael Somare, sacked as foreign minister last December, and now leading the National Alliance Party.

Earlier this month he stated his opposition to privatisation, declaring: "Don't be fooled by the government's sweet talk that the interests of ordinary Papua New Guineans will be catered for in the privatised organisations." Yet only several months ago he was an ardent defender of the IMF measures. "I am very proud of the part played by its ministers serving the governing coalition in putting together the rescue package with the World Bank and IMF in the government," he said.

Somare's duplicity highlights the fact that not just Morauta but the entire Port Moresby establishment is committed to meeting the demands of global capital, whatever populist and nationalist stances they adopt for political purposes. They represent a small privileged layer resting on the enormous mining profits being generated by giant corporations such as BP, BHP, and Royal Dutch Shell, while presiding over the worsening impoverishment of workers and villagers.

The IMF-World Bank measures will further intensify this social polarisation, cutting social spending and wiping out many of the remaining reasonably-paid jobs available to working families. Even if the Morauta government is able to regain control of the situation in the immediate short-term, the social tensions will continue to escalate.



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