Eye-witnesses confirm that police killed Papua New Guinea students

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A government-appointed inquiry into the killing of four demonstrators during student-led anti-privatisation protests in June has heard overwhelming evidence, including eye-witness accounts, confirming that police shot the protesters.

Public outrage over the shootings in the capital, Port Moresby, forced the government of Prime Minister Mekere Morauta to establish a commission of inquiry headed by former High Court judge Sir Robert Kynnerseley Woods. The five-week inquiry concluded at the end of September but its report has not yet been released.

Associate professor of law, Dr Luluaki testified that on the night of June 25, police initially shot away from students after chasing them to the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) but changed their line of fire the next morning. “About 6.30—between 6.30 and 7 o’clock—I saw students being fired at and I could actually see dust or soil being turfed up on the side of the campus...

“I saw one student being actually shot. When I saw that, I yelled at the policemen, ‘See what you have done to my students now. You have shot them. They are now dead. What are you going to do? You have shot my students.’ And one of those policemen turned around and pointed his gun at me”.

Tony Sua, a final year student, witnessed the shooting of fellow student Steven Kil: “One of them (the police), gave a signal and simultaneously opened fire on us. These shots brought most of the students down and Steven is not an exclusion. Before I stepped back for cover, I could glance a gun fired. At that very moment, I fell over with blood all over my right hand and the chest. As far as I can recall, I called for help but everyone was caring for his own life in the midst of teargas. Steven laid motionless on the lawn”.

Other eye-witnesses gave detailed accounts of the police shootings, including several academics, a local resident, a worker for Telikom—the national phone company—and a passerby who was shot in the leg by police.

Police claimed that they shot in the air but Gibert Kerekere, a phone worker who visited the scene several days later, said: “We stopped on the way and started checking out some of the trees on the hillside where the students were shot. We noticed a number of them had visible marks of bullets penetrating them from various angles”.

This evidence corroborated a report broadcast before the inquiry by Australian Broadcasting Corporation journalist Richard Dinnen, who noted: “The grass here is littered with spent bullets. The walls and windows are riddled with bullet holes.”

The shootings occurred after Morauta’s government flew in police mobile squads, renowned for their brutality, from Mt Hagen and Rabaul to break up a six-day sit-in protest against the government’s wholesale privatisation of public services and other Structural Adjustment Program measures dictated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

The student-led demonstrators blockaded government offices and effectively shut down most of the capital, with no bus services operating. Thousands of jobless youth and workers from the shantytowns surrounding Port Moresby joined the protest, despite Morauta’s attempt to discredit the students by denouncing them as the stooges of unnamed opposition politicians. It was the second major challenge within months to the World Bank-IMF program, following a two-week army mutiny in March, triggered by a plan to slash the size of the armed forces.

The mobile squads used a combination of tear-gas,

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beatings and shooting into the air to disperse the peaceful crowd at the government offices and then chased students back to the university, killing four people and wounding 24 in the ensuing confrontations in and near the campus.

Despite the incontrovertible evidence, there is every indication that the inquiry will whitewash the police killings and blame the students for the deaths. According to the police version of events, students fought among themselves, killing each other.

The *National* newspaper reported that Sarea Soi, the counsel assisting the government and police, concluded: “There is no direct evidence of police shooting the deceased and the victims. The injuries sustained by the demonstrators, if we are to believe them, are in our view against the weight of the evidence”.

A number of police officers also claimed that they acted in self-defence, confronted by students armed with rocks, petrol bombs and several guns. No other witnesses confirmed this. The only physical evidence presented by police was a plastic bottle with a wick and some petrol in it.

Laman Kapinias, a police officer from Mount Hagen, was asked: “How far away were the students from you and your fellow policemen when they began throwing petrol bombs, sticks and stones?” Incredibly, he claimed that the students had been only five metres away. Another policeman claimed he had been shot at three times. But no police were shot, burnt or seriously injured at the campus. By contrast, several students produced medical certificates showing that they were injured by shotgun pellets.

These contradictions in the police evidence went largely unchallenged. Instead, the inquiry concluded with the counsel assisting the commission criticising the police, not for the shootings but for failing to enforce the law more vigorously against the protesters. Molean Kilepak condemned police for not arresting demonstrators for harassment, intimidation and threatening behaviour. “There appeared to be no action or any attempt made against demonstrators to protect or prevent incidents of breaches of constitutional rights,” he declared.

The final submission made by the counsel assisting an inquiry is normally a good indication of the final findings. After five weeks of hearings and the gathering of hundreds of pages of transcripts of evidence and submissions, Woods announced that he would hand his report to Morauta on October 2, allowing just four days to review the evidence and write his report.

Morauta appears to have every confidence that the inquiry will exonerate the police and his government. At the UPNG Alumni Association Fundraising Dinner, held before inquiry ended, he renewed his allegations that the protests were politically orchestrated. “Some of those concocting this poison teach and study at UPNG. They are perverting the purpose of our university. The protest leaders had one aim, and one aim only—to force me to resign.”

The government has not announced when the inquiry report will be released and the media has dropped all references to it. It seems that Morauta is waiting for an opportune moment to reveal the findings, knowing that they may spark further unrest.

All the fundamental issues that gave rise to both the student-led protest and the military mutiny remain. Because of popular opposition and declining investor interest, the privatisation program has fallen far behind schedule, but Morauta recently expressed confidence that the PNG Banking Corporation would be sold off by the end of the year. Under intense pressure from the World Bank and IMF, the government is continuing to impose their policies.

An IMF review completed at the end of September praised Morauta’s government for the “remarkable achievement” of implementing a “comprehensive program of economic adjustment and structural reform” in the face of a “very difficult political and economic environment”. At the same time, IMF deputy managing director Eduardo Aninat warned that the economy was in a “weak state” and the IMF’s program had proceeded at a slower pace than anticipated.

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