

Solomon Islands parliament approves Australian-led military take-over

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Under strong pressure from the Australian and New Zealand governments, the Solomon Islands parliament last Thursday voted for enabling legislation to give the green light for an Australian-led military intervention and indefinite takeover of the country's administrative apparatus.

The Facilitation of International Assistance 2003 legislation provides the 2,000-strong military force with wide-ranging powers, including the authority to shoot to kill to defend people and property or "to achieve a public purpose". Foreign troops will have complete freedom of movement throughout the country, be immune from prosecution under local law and exempt from all customs and immigration regulations.

The legislation was drawn up not in Honiara but in Canberra and Wellington along with three detailed briefing papers for Solomon Islands parliamentarians, setting out proposals for a Comprehensive Package of Strengthened Assistance to the country. Such was the contempt in Canberra for the parliamentary deliberations in Honiara that the documents were leaked to sections of the Australian media before they were even tabled in the Solomon Islands. To date, the complete text has not been published in the Solomons or made public in Australia.

The military deployment is the largest to the South West Pacific since World War II. The Australian Navy ship, the *Manoora*, sailed on Monday to act as an offshore command centre. Australia will send an infantry company, Iroquois helicopters, patrol boats and landing craft, and logistical support of up to 1,500 military personnel. The remaining 500 troops will come from New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Tonga.

While the final legislation is yet to be published, the scope of the Australian-led intervention is already evident. In addition to 400 police, who will effectively control the Solomon Islands police force, a group of more than 100 civilian administrators and officials, mostly Australian, will take over key aspects of the country's administration, including finance, tax, customs and the judiciary.

The briefing papers envisage the building of a temporary remand facility and a new prison, and up to 50 personnel to run them. A senior magistrate is to be appointed to "deal with high-profile cases that remain unresolved". Australia agreed to

extend the contract of Central Bank governor Rick Ho, but reserved the right to "request" the appointment of a foreign official if Ho were not available. An Australian is expected to be installed as Deputy Police Commissioner.

To oversee the intervention, the Australian government has appointed high-profile diplomat Nick Warner who will act as an "independent political adviser" to the Solomon Islands Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza. Warner's career includes nine years as a senior official for the Australian intelligence agency—the Office of National Assessments (ONA)—as well as a string of sensitive diplomatic posts. In March, he was appointed Ambassador for Counter-Terrorism.

With effective control over the country's police, finance and judiciary, Warner will function as a de-facto colonial governor, dictating terms to the Solomon Islands government. He flew into Honiara last week for discussions with Kemakeza and the country's police commissioner William Morrell—a British police officer appointed earlier this year. Warner expects to work in the prime minister's office.

The scope of the military intervention, particularly the announcement that the foreign soldiers would be authorised to use lethal force, has provoked concern in the Solomon Islands. Prime Minister Kemakeza was compelled in the course of the parliamentary debate to insist that the intervention was "coming to help us, not harm us. They are not coming to take over the country."

Reflecting broader disquiet, several parliamentarians expressed qualms about ceding effective control of the country to Canberra. Opposition leader John Garo endorsed the legislation on the basis that the intervention was the "only way forward" for the country. But he declared: "The opposition have many questions about the intervention that are still unanswered."

Former Prime Minister Batholomew Ulufa'alu attempted to move an amendment to make the financing of the intervention subject to parliament. "That is the legal requirement if the sovereignty of the country is to be upheld," he declared. "If the sovereignty has been watered [down] and disappeared, okay, you can do it. It's annexation then, it's not helping."

Canberra had made clear, however, that if the Comprehensive Package of Strengthened Assistance were not accepted *in toto*

then it would not go ahead at all. Ulufa'alu's amendment was defeated and he then joined the other parliamentarians in voting unanimously for the enabling legislation.

The Howard government has justified the intervention on the basis that the Solomon Islands is "a failed state," which will become a breeding ground for terrorism and crime. But Canberra bears major responsibility for the current social and economic problems. Particularly in the aftermath of the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis, the Australian government insisted on savage austerity measures as the price for loans and other forms of assistance. The resulting unemployment and poverty exacerbated tensions between ethnic groups and led to fighting between rival militia groups, culminating in a coup in 2000.

The Howard government is now cynically exploiting the social disaster that it helped create in order to justify the imposition of colonial-style rule in Honiara and to blackmail the Solomon Islands government into accepting it. Having cut off aid to the Solomons earlier in the year, Canberra has promised to provide limited financial support—but only on condition that the military intervention is accepted.

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Even before the Solomon Islands vote last week, Australian police and officials were in Honiara to prepare for the arrival of troops and police. Australian advisers interviewed the heads of government departments, as well as the central bank, in preparation for taking charge. According to an Australian Broadcasting Corporation report, they were also demanding unhindered access to all government financial records.

An Australian communications strategist, Kate Graham, is in the Solomons to plan and organise an intensive "awareness" campaign to justify the intervention force. Funded by Canberra, the campaign will take over the country's national radio network three times a week for a talk-back style program aimed at stemming "misreporting and misinformation"—that is, hostility to the Australian presence.

The Australian and New Zealand media, which exercise a virtual monopoly on news from the Solomon Islands, have attempted to paint a picture of a country that has descended into social chaos and a population ready to welcome the Australian-led force as their saviour. A lengthy article that appeared in the *Australian Financial Review* last Friday by the Anglican bishop Terry Brown, based on the island of Malaita, painted a very different picture.

Brown, who makes clear that he is not opposed to the Australian intervention, nevertheless insists that the media claims of "violence, hostage-taking, anarchy and chaos" bear no relation to reality. "Old newsreels from 1999 and 2000 have been dusted off to convey this picture. Every recent killing has been highlighted and discussed. Ex-militants and their hangers-on are interviewed but not ordinary people." Based on his own extensive experience, he states: "I would say that the Solomon

Islands have serious economic and security problems but they are *not* in a state of anarchy and chaos [emphasis in the original]."

According to the bishop, the violence that has received media attention is localised to a particular area of the island of Guadalcanal and is bound up with conflicts over land and resources. He points to the fact that the emergence of militia groups is directly related to the lack of education or employment for large numbers of young people. "Because of the small number of secondary schools and very high school fees, the majority of students are pushed out of formal education at the end of Grade 6, Form 3 (Grade 9) or Form 5 (Grade 11). Many do not even get to Grade 6 and there is much illiteracy, even among the young". He emphasises the need for free education, training schemes and restarting the country's College of Higher Education, which has been closed for three years.

The purpose of the Australian-led intervention is not, however, to rebuild the country's disintegrating education, health and welfare services but to ensure that the austerity measures, which Canberra has been demanding, are actually implemented. Most of the \$300 million a year set aside by the Howard government for the intervention will be used to pay the Australian troops, police and administrators. Far from ameliorating the social crisis, Canberra's policies will inevitably lead to worsening conditions for the majority of the population, producing resentment and resistance to the presence of Australian forces.

As in the case of Australia's involvement in the Iraq war, the Howard government committed Australian troops and personnel to the Solomons completely anti-democratically. There has been no discussion or vote in parliament. The cabinet rubberstamped the decision yesterday but Australian officials were already in Honiara and the Manoora had already sailed the previous day. The troops have been assembling in Townsville for weeks and are due to arrive in the Solomons tomorrow. Despite Howard's claims to the contrary, what is underway is a classic colonial-style intervention that will have disastrous consequences for the population of the Solomons, Australia and broader Pacific region.



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