

Australian officials take control in the Solomon Islands

Will Marshall
27 August 2003

A month after an Australian-led military intervention force landed in the Solomon Islands, Australian Prime Minister John Howard flew to the small Pacific nation on Monday for a five-hour visit to inspect the troops and to lay down the law to the country's government.

Howard announced a small infusion of aid to help balance the budget and pay public service wages—just \$A25 million [\$US16 million] compared to an estimated cost of \$A200 million for the intervention as a whole. At the same time, he warned that the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) would engage in a “frontal assault on corruption”.

But when a local reporter asked if this would include asking Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza, who is being investigated for corruption, to step aside, Howard reacted: “Whoa, whoa, whoa. The Solomon Islands is an independent sovereign country. I work with the elected Prime Minister... I will certainly not get involved in the domestic politics of Solomon Islands”.

Howard's response is utterly cynical. In the name of fighting corruption and preventing a “failed state” from becoming a breeding ground for terrorism, Canberra has trampled on the country's national sovereignty and insisted on taking over key government functions. The threadbare disguise for this neo-colonial exercise is a formal invitation extended by the Kemakeza government, which is itself closely aligned with the Malaitan Eagle Force—one of several ethnic-based militias involved in the country's armed conflict.

RAMSI, which is headed by senior Australian diplomat Nick Warner, is in the process of implementing what is known as the Comprehensive Package of Strengthened Assistance to Solomon Islands. Drawn up in Canberra, the plan allows for Australian control of “police, military and economic development” through the placing of more than 100 foreign administrators and officials to run key sectors, including finance, tax, customs, the police and judiciary.

Under Warner's tutelage, Kemakeza recently removed eight governmental department heads. The move was part of

a major reshuffle of 16 senior public servants, approved by the Solomon Islands Public Service Commission in early August. To replace them, a contingent of 17 senior Australian officials has arrived in Honiara. They were due to take charge of the country's budget and customs regime yesterday.

Canberra has also dictated who will be the Central Bank governor. The bank's deputy governor Denton Rarawa admitted earlier this week that the government had received what amounted to an ultimatum to reappoint former head Rick Hou. “They (RAMSI) have indicated that if he is not re-appointed, an expatriate would be appointed. I think that was a key factor in the re-appointment process,” Rarawa said.

Australian claims that its intervention—Operation Helpem Fren—is aimed at helping the people of the Solomons Islands are belied by the priorities that have been set. Far from addressing the appalling social conditions and lack of basic services—in large part the result of past austerity measures demanded by Canberra—Australian officials have stressed that the main objectives are “law and order” and further economic restructuring.

AusAID spokeswoman Margaret Thomas, announced that the focus was the prisons, the justice systems and the budget. “The priority area is to develop a credible and affordable 2004 budget. The 2003 budget is to be stabilised... I stress that this is the first stage of a much longer process of economic reform and more broadly rebuilding the machinery of government,” she said.

A pittance is being provided to help resurrect the country's collapsed medical services—medical supplies worth just \$A440,000 but no medical staff. In many areas, local health facilities are non-existent and villagers now go straight to the main hospital in the capital Honiara. But due to staff shortages, there are frequently no doctors in attendance at the Honiara hospital and health workers are overloaded with cases of malaria, tetanus, pneumonia, meningitis and diarrhoea.

A surgical nurse Virginia Bebeu explained recently that five patients a month have been dying due to lack of medical

supplies. “Certainly, people are dying,” she declared. “They die because there’s no drugs.” Basic items such as gloves, mosquito nets, stationery, plaster of Paris and cleaning fluids are often out of stock.

While Solomon Islanders queue for overstretched services, they can see the Australian navy supply ship HMAS Manoora moored off Honiara. It is equipped with the latest in medical facilities, including eight high-dependency and 38 low-dependency hospital beds. It has three surgeons, two doctors and around 75 other medical personnel to treat the 2,000 or so members of the Australian intervention force.

In contrast, the Honiara hospital, which has only three surgeons and 13 doctors, services an estimated 150,000 people. According an article in *Cairns Post*: “The sight of the ship has raised expectations the Australian-led intervention force will move to halt the health crisis”. But no move has been made to open its facilities to Solomon Islanders to help alleviate the obvious lack of health care.

Apart from taking control of the country’s finances, RAMSI’s top priority has been to establish its police and military presence, including the setting up of new police stations and the reopening of prisons.

At a press conference last week, AusAID spokeswoman Thomas explained that a team of 45 foreign officials will be placed in supervisory positions to manage the country’s prison system. The Rove prison will be expanded to house 300 inmates and 14 Australian prison wardens will work as shift supervisors to “mentor” Solomon Islands prison guards. The country’s prison farm at Tetera on the Guadalcanal Plains is due to re-open next week.

Despite claims that all is going well, Warner and other Australian officials are obviously preparing for an influx of prisoners as hostility and resistance to the Australian military and police presence grow. The government at Canberra’s bidding issued a deadline of August 21 for all weapons to be surrendered. Anyone found in possession of illegal guns after the expiry of the deadline faces the prospect of massive fines and up to 10 years in jail.

The Australian military and police plan to use the hunt for illegal weapons as the pretext for searching villages and stamping their authority on the country. Already a string of police posts have been established across the island of Guadalcanal—at Avu Avu, Kolina, Tari and Turarana—with more planned. At Avu Avu on the eastern end of Guadalcanal’s remote Weathercoast, two police are backed by 50 Australian and Fijian soldiers. Another 50 soldiers were sent to Auki, the provincial capital of the neighbouring island of Malaita, to bolster the police post that was opened there on August 8.

The threat of attack by Australian forces was clearly a major factor in the surrender of militia leader Harold Keke

and three of his lieutenants on August 13. Keke has been built up in the Australian and international media as chief villain of the Solomon Islands—responsible for terrorising the people of the Weathercoast. He is accused of murder and robbery but his real crime in the Howard government’s eyes was that he refused to accept the terms of the Townsville agreement dictated by Canberra in 2000 for the disarming of militia.

With the gun amnesty due to run out, Keke held a series of talks with RAMSI officials to set the terms of his surrender. As the *New Zealand Herald* dryly commented he was “faced with a very indefinite future if he tried to resist the intervention forces.” Fearing reprisals from other militia groups, Keke insisted that he be placed in custody aboard the HMAS Manoora. He appeared at a makeshift court on 14 August and charged with attempted murder, robbery, and two counts of unlicensed possession of firearms.

International coverage of the events in the Solomon Islands has been monopolised almost entirely by the Australian and New Zealand media, which has uniformly presented the image of a successful intervention welcomed by the local people. Press reports of Howard’s visit featured crowds of school children and villagers cheering “Thank you Howard and thank you Australia”.

It is difficult to gauge precisely what the immediate reaction has been in the Solomon Islands to the Australian-led military intervention. Among some sections of the population, there undoubtedly is a measure of relief and the expectation that social and economic conditions will improve. But it will not take long for those hopes turn to frustration and hostility as it becomes clear that Canberra’s economic policies will bring no relief for the majority of people and that its only answers to unemployment and poverty are police and prisons.

Howard hinted at what is to come when he warned in the course of his brief visit: “I know much hope has been generated in the community but there are still difficult weeks and months ahead and we should not assume that in the normal course there may not be some setbacks.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact