

Australia's next neo-colonial intervention begins in Papua New Guinea

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23 December 2003

The first contingent of 12 Australian police officers arrived last week in Papua New Guinea (PNG) as part of a far-reaching intervention by Canberra to effectively take charge of key elements of the country's administration. As part of its "enhanced cooperation package," Australia is sending 230 police, as well as civil servants, to take up top positions in PNG's police force, court system, finance and planning agencies, customs and civil aviation.

The 12 police will undergo a one-week crash course at the Bomana Police Academy to familiarise them with local police procedures, language and culture. The officers will be directly involved at an operational level and are likely to be deployed within weeks to the island of Bougainville. Others will be based in the capital Port Moresby as well as Lae and the major towns in the Highlands region, including Mount Hagen and eventually Enga and Mendi.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and his PNG counterpart Rabbie Namaliu formally agreed on the package, estimated to cost \$800 million over five years, at a ministerial meeting in Adelaide on December 11. Both sought to downplay the intervention, which provoked considerable public acrimony earlier this year before Port Moresby finally bowed to Canberra's demands.

Speaking at the press conference, Downer sought to differentiate Australia's involvement in PNG from the intervention of Australian police and officials, backed by 2,000 troops, into neighbouring Solomon Islands in August. "The Solomon Islands Government... was on the precipice of becoming a failed state. Papua New Guinea is not in anything like the situation that Solomon Islands was in."

While Namaliu formally expressed appreciation to Canberra for assistance with PNG's law-and-order

problems, he was obviously sensitive to the political consequences of the presence of the former colonial ruler in the country. A few days after the Adelaide summit, he took out an advertisement in the *Post Courier* declaring: "Papua New Guinea is not about to descend into anarchy with or without this assistance. It is not an intervention, it is simply an agreement."

The extent of Australia's planned involvement in PNG, however, leaves no doubt as to its neo-colonial aims. Australian officials will take over the posts of Solicitor General, that is the country's top legal official; and deputy police commissioner. Three litigation lawyers will assist in the Solicitor General's office and five prosecutors will join the Public Prosecutor's Office. Four Australian judges will be appointed to the National and Supreme Courts.

Up to 36 Australian financial specialists will be inserted into key economic, finance, planning and spending agencies to supervise the imposition of the economic restructuring measures demanded by Canberra along with the World Bank and IMF. Another 10 officials will be placed in PNG's immigration services, border and transport security, and aviation safety. An Australian will take over as deputy chief executive officer of the Civil Aviation Authority.

All of this is remarkably similar to the Solomons, where Australian public servants have been inserted in top administrative posts related to police, justice, finance and the prisons. Moreover, as was the case in the Solomons, where officials landed in Honiara before the Solomon Islands parliament gave final approval, Australian police began arriving in PNG prior to the conclusion of a PNG cabinet meeting formally ratifying the Adelaide agreement.

The interventions in the PNG and the Solomons are part of a far-reaching shift in Australian policy over the

past year. The Howard government participated in the US-led occupation of Iraq in order to legitimise and gain the support of the Bush administration for its own plans to assert its sphere of influence in the South Pacific. Just months after the invasion of Iraq, Canberra announced its own “preemptive action” in the Solomons Islands, declaring that the “failed state” posed a danger to Australia.

Like Washington, Canberra claimed, without providing any evidence, that the Solomons Islands and PNG could become bases for international crime and terrorism and thus threaten Australia. The real motives, however, are to shore up Australian imperialism’s economic and strategic interests in the region. In the case of PNG, Australian corporations have around \$4 billion invested, in the lucrative mining sector in particular.

As in the case of the Solomon Islands, the Howard government threatened to cut off financial aid to PNG to force Port Moresby to accept the “enhanced cooperation package,” provoking weeks of public animosity. PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare threatened to formulate an “Australian Aid Exit Strategy” and find financial assistance elsewhere. But Australia’s aid is worth \$330 million annually and amounts to 20 percent of PNG government revenue. Moreover, Somare also faced the possibility of a sustained destabilisation campaign by Canberra, which previously worked to unseat the Chan government in 1997. Somare was forced to drop his rhetoric and agree to the plan last September.

It is highly likely that the US gave its prior support for the Australian intervention. As the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted in October: “Downer has been emboldened by early success in the Solomon Islands and was floating off his seat after this endorsement from US President George Bush..., ‘Security in the Asia Pacific region will always depend on the willingness of nations to take responsibility for their neighbourhood, as Australia is doing . . . And America is grateful’.”

Despite the Howard government’s claims, its “enhanced cooperation package” will do nothing to improve the appalling social conditions facing the majority of the PNG population. In fact, Canberra’s policies have been a major contributing factor to the country’s social crisis. While Australian companies

have extracted billions of dollars in profit, Port Moresby has been forced to slash public spending and carry out structural reforms that have exacerbated unemployment and poverty.

According to Dr David Kavanamur, a lecturer from the School of Business at the University of Papua New Guinea: “Despite reform efforts, the country continues to record a negative economic growth rate and has Human Development Indicators amongst the lowest in the world.” The Asian Development Bank reported that over a third of the population live in absolute poverty.

Nothing will be done to shore up the country’s crumbling health and education systems. School fees in parts of Port Moresby will double in 2004 putting education beyond the reach of many. The health system is having to cope with an escalating AIDS crisis. Rather than tackling the social roots of the rising levels of crime in PNG, additional Australian funding will go towards bolstering the country’s security apparatus. Canberra is demanding that the PNG military, which has been a source of political instability, be restructured and cut from 2,800 to 2,000 personnel.

All of this will only fuel resentment towards the Australian presence in PNG. Whatever the initial reaction, Australia’s predatory intervention in Papua New Guinea will inevitably face political opposition and resistance from an increasingly hostile population.



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