

An exchange on the Australian intervention in the Solomon Islands

Mike Head
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The following is a reply to correspondence received from Dominic Morice, media manager, public affairs group, AusAID, which is the Australian government's overseas aid agency. Morice's letter, the full text of which can be read [here](#), alleges that the WSWs article "Australia's richest man profits from Solomon Islands intervention", posted on March 3, contains "a number of factual errors".

Dear Mr Morice,

Thank you for your letter of March 11. It provides us with an opportunity to further clarify the nature of the Australian intervention into the Solomon Islands. We reject entirely your allegation that the article posted on March 3 contains factual errors. Your letter provides no facts, details or information that in anyway contradict the article. Your inability to do so only raises new questions about the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and the profitable part being played by major corporations, including Kerry Packer's GRM International.

Like the Howard government, you insist that the dispatch of 2,200 troops, police and officials to the Solomon Islands last July was primarily a humanitarian operation, dedicated to ensuring that "the lives of everyday Solomon Islanders are improved". You echo the government's claim that the intervention was not imposed, but requested voluntarily by the Solomons government, which retains full sovereignty.

Yet the record demonstrates the opposite: Canberra and its allies, chiefly the Clark government in New Zealand, have bullied the Solomons people into submitting to a neo-colonial regime, with RAMSI taking control over the key institutions of the state—the prisons, the police and the finance ministry. Operation Helpem Fren (Helping Friend) is part of an underlying shift in foreign policy, in the wake of the Iraq invasion, aimed at asserting unchallenged Australian hegemony throughout the southwest Pacific.

Let me begin with the sole "factual error" that you attempt to identify. You state: "Contrary to the claims made in Mr Head's article, GRM is not managing the Solomon Islands Prison Service or any other part of the criminal justice system. The prison service and the court system are managed by the Solomon Islands Government according to Solomon Islands law."

We stand by the March 3 article's statement that "with RAMSI taking charge of key government functions, GRM is effectively running the prisons under a beefed-up contract". As it happens, GRM has advertised this month on its web site to fill the position of "Controller of Prisons, Solomon Islands Prison Service". The duties of the post's occupant include: "Manage the operations of the Solomon Islands Prison Service, including objective setting, performance monitoring, and implementation of Government policies and maintenance of appropriate security standards".

There you have it. The Controller of Prisons, the head of the prison service, is selected and employed by GRM. While the advertisement refers to implementing the policies of the Solomon Islands government, it specifies that the incumbent "will report to the Team Leader and Project

Director as required". Thus, the GRM appointee is accountable to the director of the "Solomon Islands Law and Justice Sector Institutional Strengthening Program"—which GRM has a \$30 million AusAID contract to administer on behalf of the Australian government. The director, in turn, reports to the RAMSI Special Coordinator, former Australian diplomat Nick Warner.

There is no mention of any accountability to the Solomon Islands government. Instead, the advertisement states that the appointee will provide "advice to the Minister on complex and nationwide issues". Formally speaking, Solomon Islands law may remain in place, but the ad specifies that the Controller can assume the full powers of the prison service: "In circumstances where it is deemed necessary for the proper management of the prison or prisoners and/or the development of Counterparts, the laws of the Solomon Islands allows for the incumbent to move from the Adviser role and undertake activities adopting the Solomon Islands Prison Service powers".

In practice, according to the former GRM security officer whom the WSWs interviewed for the March 3 article, this means that the GRM's Controller and his staff take complete charge of prison operations, including beatings of inmates, whenever they see fit. There are now six GRM "advisers" on each shift at Rove prison, supervising only nine local warders.

Gary Scott, the Brisbane-based lawyer who was earlier interviewed by the WSWs [*See: Australian lawyer condemns lack of legal rights in the Solomon Islands*], has confirmed that the previous Controller and the commandant of Rove prison, the country's main jail in Honiara, have been replaced by GRM employees. In a letter to the WSWs, Scott commented that, in any case, "the former controller of the prison did not do anything significant without running it past the white advisers".

Scott also refutes your claim that prisoners are being treated in a way that respects their "dignity and human rights". He states that prison conditions remain in the deplorable state that he described in his WSWs interview. "I believe that my client and his fellow ex-Malaitan and Eagle Force inmates are still being kept in inhumane conditions in solitary confinement." These prisoners are among the more than 700 people arrested by the RAMSI forces in the name of cracking down on gangs and militia members.

The situation in the prisons is indicative of the wider Australian takeover. You claim that we incorrectly failed to mention that all 16 Pacific Island Forum countries support RAMSI, which entered the Solomons at the request of the Solomon Islands government and parliament. As we have documented in previous WSWs statements and articles, the Howard government extracted a formal invitation from the Solomons government by making an "offer" it could not refuse.

The economy was in a state of collapse, exacerbated by the Howard government's decision to cut off aid in 2002. Foreign debt had reached a record \$A352 million, external reserves had shrunk to \$30 million—little more than two months of import cover—public sector workers were not

being paid on time and utilities and communications were regularly out of service because the government had failed to pay its bills. The Solomons authorities knew that international assistance would be forthcoming only on Canberra's terms.

Prime minister John Howard summoned the leaders of the Pacific Island Forum to Sydney last July to rubberstamp the intervention and provide a veneer of legitimacy. Facing severe economic difficulties of their own, the small Pacific island states quickly acquiesced. New Zealand's Helen Clark weighed in behind Howard, seizing the opportunity to further New Zealand's own interests in the region.

The Australian government then gave the Solomons prime minister, Sir Allan Kemakera, an ultimatum: the intervention would be called off unless the Solomon Islands parliament passed special legislation giving virtually unlimited powers to intervention force personnel and granting them legal immunity for any actions they took. In the end, every Solomons MP lined up with Kemakera and voted for the laws, but at least six expressed concerns that the blatantly colonial nature of the operation would provoke unrest among ordinary people.

The Facilitation of International Assistance Act 2003 is an extraordinary document. Not only does it grant the armed forces and police of the "assisting countries" full powers of the local police; it authorises the intervention force to use, in addition, "such force as is reasonably necessary to achieve a public purpose," including the carrying and firing of weapons. Members of the "visiting contingent" are given free reign over the country—to use any road, bridge, port or airfield, and any accommodation and water, electricity and other public facilities, free of charge.

They are also given absolute immunity from criminal and civil legal proceedings for actions relating to their duties, as well as being shielded from Solomon Islands jurisdiction over other breaches of law. The latter proviso would cover offences such as rape or assault committed while off-duty. To reinforce the point, intervention force commanders "have sole responsibility for the internal command, control, discipline and administration" of their personnel. Finally, the Solomons government can expand the intervention force's powers and privileges at any time by regulations, without recalling parliament.

In purely formal terms, Solomon Islands may remain a sovereign state, but as the Act illustrates, Australian officers and officials have taken charge, working hand-in-glove with consultants and business operators such as Packer.

Your letter insists that "RAMSI has a wider focus than just restoring law and order". It speaks of "restoring basic services" and "assisting with economic reform". Canberra is financing the deployment of troops, police, prison supervisors and security guards to the tune of more than \$200 million this financial year. But according to your own AusAID web site, it has only allocated some \$17 million for health services since May 2001 and up to \$5 million over the next three years for Australian non government organisations (NGOs) to run community programs.

This is under conditions of appalling poverty and woefully inadequate health, education and other basic services. With a yearly GDP per head of \$US530, the Solomons' half million people are among the poorest in the world. The Asian Development Bank estimates that more than 20 percent of children are malnourished; 21 percent of children under 5 are underweight; malaria is endemic with an annual incidence rate of 21 percent; infant mortality is 38 per 1,000 births; and life expectancy is 65 years. Less than 40 percent of children complete primary school and functional adult literacy is as low as 22 percent.

You claim that "government finances have been stabilised leading to increased service delivery, especially in health and education". Where is the evidence? Why no details? What AusAID projects can you cite? The AusAID web site suggests a different story. It refers only to strengthening health sector management to ensure that "health services can be provided

over the longer term". It speaks of making "more effective use of limited health funding". The reference to "limited" is revealing. It points to the fact that the primary focus of the Australian program is not to provide the assistance that is critically needed to address the health crisis but to cut costs and ration medical services, to ensure that they do not exceed bureaucratically-imposed spending limits.

This marks an intensification of the financial bullying that has helped create the humanitarian catastrophe. In 2002, the Howard government led other donor countries in refusing to provide any funds to the Solomon Islands until the Kemakera government implemented plans to retrench 1,300 public sector employees, about 30 percent of its workforce. Austerity programs enforced by the IMF, World Bank and Asian Development Bank had already halved the number of government employees from 8,473 to 4,337 between 1993 and 1999.

There are other signs that the "economic reform" program is being stepped up. In January, RAMSI chief Warner stepped in to demand the reversal of a small wage rise of some \$8 a fortnight for lowly-paid public sector workers who were earning about \$30 a week. Meanwhile, Australian and GRM advisers and consultants are being paid salaries 100 times higher—some \$14,000 a month—soaking up much of the "aid" funding.

This is an imperialist intervention, conducted not in the interests of the Solomons or Australian people, but rather to advance the economic, military and political interests of corporate Australia. It follows a century and a half of colonial and semi-colonial domination, ever since Britain annexed the Solomon Islands in the late nineteenth century. After decades of neglect, Britain declared the territory formally independent in 1978. In effect, Britain's interests were ceded to Australia and its financial elite, who have led the way in exploiting the islands' resources, particularly timber, fish, gold and palm oil.

Australia's neo-colonial domination is now being tightened, and the main beneficiaries appear to be some of Australia's largest companies. You report that GRM International's contract in the Solomons is worth \$30 million. According to the AusAID web site, the original contract, which you insist that GRM won by competitive tender in 2000, was for \$15 million. Was there a tender for the doubling of the contract?

It seems that our article has touched a raw nerve, not only in Canberra, but also in the Solomons and across the Pacific region. Despite your unsubstantiated assertion that RAMSI enjoys "very strong support in Solomon Islands," your reaction to the article suggests real concerns in ruling circles that popular opposition to the intervention will emerge and grow as the occupation continues indefinitely.

Given the general lack of independent media coverage from Solomon Islands, it is difficult to gauge the current level of support. Many people may have regarded the intervention initially as the only hope of relief from economic and social disaster. Others may have been intimidated by the sheer scale of the armed force.

But as it becomes clear that Canberra's only answers to unemployment and poverty are police and prisons, frustration and hostility are sure to develop. As early as last August, Oxfam Community Aid Abroad reported that "the overwhelming welcome for the intervention has masked many Solomon Island voices, who are urging caution about the duration of the military and police deployment, the manner in which corruption and lawlessness will be addressed, and the need for long-term development programs that prioritise education, health and sustainable livelihoods".

The Howard government has no intention of providing such basic programs when it is cutting back on every area of social spending at home. The longer the Australian takeover lasts in the Solomon Islands, the more the social and political tensions will grow and the more opponents of the Australian government's actions will find their voices, in the Solomons, Australia and across the region.

Yours sincerely,



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact