

Solomon Islands: prison protest over lack of rights under Australian intervention

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A prison protest broke out in the Solomon Islands last week, less than three weeks after official celebrations to mark the first anniversary of the arrival of more than 2,000 Australian-led military and police officers in the South Pacific country. For all the claims of a popular and successful intervention, the uprising in Honiara's overcrowded Rove prison—the Solomons' main jail—highlights the suppression of basic legal and democratic rights that has accompanied it.

Pivotal to the activities of the intervention force has been the rounding up and jailing of hundreds of so-called militants and gang members, allegedly belonging to several militia that fought for control of the impoverished state after its economy began to disintegrate in 1998. Speaking at the anniversary ceremony in Honiara, Australian Defence Minister Robert Hill boasted that almost 3,000 arrests had been made and more than 3,700 guns seized.

Hundreds of those arrested have remained incarcerated for up to 12 months and are still awaiting trial. Last week, Rove prison held 216 such remand prisoners. They had been denied adequate food, and many had been coerced into making confessions while refused access to legal advice. Those designated as security risks had been kept in solitary confinement for up to 23 hours a day.

Eighty or so prisoners broke out of their cells on the morning of August 10, demanding an end to these intolerable conditions. Prisoners reportedly overpowered two warders, seized their keys and opened cell doors. They breached several prison walls and reached the outer perimeter before Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) soldiers and police sealed off the prison.

During the ensuing confrontation, stones were allegedly thrown at police cameramen, with prisoners climbing onto a cell block roof, demanding to see senior government figures. A police spokesman conceded that the prisoners did not attempt to escape but vented their frustration at their "inhuman treatment". Nevertheless, authorities stoked fears of a mass breakout, ordering the evacuation of the

neighbouring area, including the removal of students from a local school and kindergarten.

RAMSI commanders assumed direct control over the prison, replacing the local police and warders, but were not able to restore order until 7 pm, when inmates reportedly surrendered. Police media officer John Selwyn Tiaro denied that tear gas and other force was used, but announced that all prisoners had been handcuffed to prevent any further resistance.

Local police officers told reporters that anti-intervention slogans were painted inside the prison. Some prisoners were heard shouting slogans calling for the withdrawal of RAMSI. Inmates alleged that RAMSI officials had used threats and offers of immunity or bail to coerce prisoners into making written statements implicating themselves and others in crimes ranging from murder to extortion. In a petition, they called for the holding of reconciliation ceremonies, the granting of pardons and the abolition of immunity from prosecution for members of the intervention force.

After the protest was suppressed, prisoners sent a petition to Police and National Security Minister Michael Maina alleging reckless and violent behaviour by RAMSI officers. RAMSI police commander Sandy Peisley, however, flatly denied that prisoners were mistreated; baldly asserting that order was restored by negotiation.

The next day, in an attempt to defuse the situation, the country's High Court granted a number of orders sought by the inmates. It declared that the segregation of "high security risk" prisoners was illegal and unreasonable, that the prison management plan was improper and that the food rations failed to meet minimum standards.

The court condemned the poor rations, including the prison service's refusal to provide 7 grams of milk a day as unlawful. It also ruled that the decisions to provide only a 40-gram navy biscuit packet each morning, and not to provide curry and salt as required, were in breach of regulations.

Despite maintaining that isolation cells are necessary for

security reasons, Australian officials sought to wipe their hands of the appalling conditions, claiming that it was a matter for the prison authorities. Yet, the man in charge of the jail, Commissioner of Prisons Phil Norris, is an employee of GRM International, a company owned by Australian media and gambling magnate Kerry Packer. GRM, which holds a \$30 million contract from the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) to manage the country's prison system, appointed Norris to the post earlier this year.

Norris' appointment typifies the way in which the Howard government, and well-placed corporate interests, have installed senior officials in the Solomon Islands administration, turning the country into a semi-colony. Australian officials and consultants have taken key posts in the police force, judicial administration and finance ministry.

While the Howard government portrayed last year's intervention as a humanitarian effort—dubbed Operation Helpim Fren (Helping Friend)—it formed part of an aggressive shift in foreign policy in the wake of the Iraq war. It signalled the use of military and economic muscle to trample over national sovereignty in order to reinforce Australian strategic and commercial dominance over the southwest Pacific.

RAMSI's neo-colonial character was underscored by the response of New Zealand Foreign Minister Phil Goff to the prison riot. The New Zealand Labour government has acted as Canberra's deputy in the intervention, contributing troops and police personnel to secure its own interests in the region. Goff said the disturbance showed how important it was to continue the presence of a RAMSI military component—some 500 troops still remain—and for security to be strengthened to deal with ongoing problems inside the prison. He insisted that the prisoners' demands for pardons, reconciliation and the withdrawal of immunity for RAMSI officers would not be met.

The tensions inside the prison reflect wider social discontent, and mounting dissatisfaction with the economic agenda being pursued by the RAMSI powers and its trampling on democratic rights. One year after the intervention force arrived, virtually nothing has been done to alleviate the poverty or improve the health, education and social services of the Solomons' half a million people, who remain among the poorest in the world.

Instead, the central purpose of RAMSI has been to establish "law and order" as a precondition for corporate investment to exploit the islands' natural resources, plantations, potential tourism development and other market opportunities. In a speech on RAMSI's first anniversary, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer emphasised the necessity to remove all obstacles to the creation of a

"robust private sector" in the Solomons.

Downer asserted that the small country's economy had failed because of "government domination" of potentially profitable activities. Breaking this grip, privatising services and "providing a stable environment for private business" were "fundamental," he insisted.

His declaration simply ignored the legacy of decades of British control over the islands before they were formally declared independent in 1978. Moreover, Canberra has directly contributed to the economic and social crisis in the Solomon Islands by repeatedly insisting that the country slash public sector jobs and services or face a cutoff of Australian and overseas aid.

Downer demanded that this free market program be intensified. He specifically stipulated the opening up to private business of basic services such as telecommunications, electricity and water, the abolition of communal land tenure, and the removal of "cumbersome investment regulations", accompanied by labour market deregulation to lower workers' wages and conditions. He launched a report by his department, *Solomon Islands: Rebuilding an Island Economy*, which lays down a virtual blueprint for a dramatic economic restructuring along these lines.

This plan will have devastating consequences for the way of life of most Solomons people, which is based on village and communal relations, kinship support and subsistence farming. It will fully subject them to the dictates of global markets, as well as line the pockets of Australian and New Zealand business consultants and entrepreneurs. Such conditions will inevitably deepen the social misery of the population and generate growing resentment against the Australian-led neo-colonial intervention.



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