

Australian policeman murdered in the Solomon Islands

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The murder of Australian Protective Service officer Adam Dunning in the Solomon Islands has highlighted simmering discontent towards the Australian-led intervention in the tiny Pacific island state. Dunning was killed in the early hours of December 22, while on patrol in the capital Honiari. He was hit in the back by two of six rounds fired from a high-calibre rifle at the Toyota Land Cruiser in which he was travelling.

The murder was clearly against the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which has effectively taken over key functions in the country, including the police, prisons, courts and finance. The killing punctures the myth, carefully cultivated by the Australian government and media, that there is no opposition to what is effectively a neo-colonial occupation of the country.

The attack on Dunning is not an isolated event. RAMSI claims that the alleged murderer, James Tatau, who has just been captured, is connected to a previous shooting incident. In October, three shots were fired at another RAMSI vehicle resulting in a Nauruan police officer receiving minor shrapnel wounds. His Tongan colleague escaped uninjured.

In response to the Dunning murder, Australian Prime Minister John Howard declared that his government was “undeterred, unrestrained, unaffected by what’s happening.” Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, who just days before had been in Honiara praising RAMSI officials, declared: “We won’t be cowed by this.” Canberra immediately dispatched a rapid response squad of 100 troops to bolster the security forces already in the country.

Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty blamed isolated criminal elements for the killing, saying: “By far the majority of people in the Solomon Islands have welcomed RAMSI. They’ve celebrated the results that RAMSI has achieved for the people of the Solomon Islands”. But the decision to send more heavily armed troops to the Solomons as a show of force indicates concerns in Canberra about broader unrest.

The media, which until now has been completely uncritical of the Australian intervention, has begun to hint at wider hostility in the Solomons. The *Australian* newspaper cited the comments of Hugh White, director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, which drew up the plan for the Australian

intervention. White declared that RAMSI had succeeded in “establishing law and order in Honiara”, then added: “They [have] collected a lot of guns and made a lot of progress but the deeper tensions hadn’t been resolved.”

A significant section of the Solomon Islands population probably did believe, initially at least, Canberra’s claims to be bringing peace and prosperity. The country had been engulfed in political turmoil since the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis precipitated an economic breakdown. Social services and the police force virtually collapsed amid fighting between rival armed gangs. Australia and New Zealand compounded the underlying economic and social problems by insisting on far-reaching economic restructuring and by withholding financial aid.

The RAMSI intervention was not aimed at helping Solomon Islanders, but at consolidating Canberra’s grip on its traditional sphere of influence in the South West Pacific. In the wake of the Iraq invasion, Howard drew on the support of Washington to mount his own “pre-emptive action”. Branding the Solomons as a “failed state” that could become a breeding ground for international terrorists and criminals, he bullied Honiara into rubberstamping an Australian takeover and other Pacific Islands nations into backing his plan.

Over the last 18 months, however, social conditions for the majority of the population have not improved and the role of RAMSI soldiers and police as an occupying force has become increasingly evident. As a result, local support for the Australian presence has fallen.

In July 2003, immediately after Australian troops had landed, a survey by the Solomon Islands Development Trust found that RAMSI’s approval rating was 94 percent. Just six months later, a similar survey found growing concerns about living standards. In the category “A Better Life”, only 64 percent of respondents gave RAMSI a favourable rating.

RAMSI has stamped its authority over the Solomon Islands by building police stations and expanding the prison system. There have been over 3,700 weapons collected and 4,000 people detained and facing charges. In doing so, Australian officials and police have trampled on basic democratic rights. Prisoners have been held in solitary for lengthy periods of time and interrogated without lawyers present.

Last August, a prison riot broke out over the lack of rights and poor food in Rove jail. Detainees were heard shouting slogans calling for RAMSI's withdrawal from the country. 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.

Broader grievances have been voiced over the lack of justice. While villagers have been arrested and detained for relatively minor crimes, local politicians who have collaborated with RAMSI have got off scot-free. Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza, for instance, who agreed to the Australian intervention, is widely accused of involvement in payoffs to one of the militia groups—the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF).

Senior Superintendent Romanu Tikotikoca, who commanded the Fijian contingent of security forces until last April, returned to the Solomons after the Dunning murder. He told the *Fiji Times* this month: “There’s a degree of dissatisfaction within the community and I picked that up during my first trip there. Those from Malaita and Guadalcanal are not happy with the arrest of some people by RAMSI.”

Complete legal immunity for RAMSI personnel, agreed to by the Solomon Islands government at Canberra’s insistence, has also become a source of discontent. Several RAMSI members have been accused of sexual misconduct towards local women and children, but have not been charged in the Solomon Islands. A case involving an Australian was being heard in Melbourne at the time of Dunning’s murder, but a court suppression order barred the release of any details.

The most outspoken opposition to RAMSI has come from the Ma’asina Forum. General Secretary William Gua said last October that the Forum strongly felt that the Enabling Bill allowing the Australian intervention to go ahead had violated the country’s sovereignty. A Forum statement condemned the Kemakeza government as “a puppet of Australia” that was being “dictated [to] by the Howard Government of Australia”.

The growing tensions are also being fuelled by the huge disparity between the lifestyle of RAMSI personnel and the poverty of most Solomon Islanders. In an interview last year with the WSWs, a former prison officer commented: “The expats who are on \$13,000 a month are living in the King Solomon Hotel with TVs, showers and maids to make their beds, etc. They are living extremely comfortably. Then the locals are living in shanties, with cooking and bathing facilities outside. It is just disgusting. In Honiara, just near the main bridge, you can see people living in sheds, 14 foot square, five to a room.”

Far from improving living standards for Solomon Islanders, RAMSI has focussed on implementing further economic restructuring. In January last year, former RAMSI chief Nick Warner insisted on the reversal of a small wage rise of \$8 a fortnight for lowly-paid public sector workers on about \$30 a week. Meanwhile, Australian advisers and consultants are

being paid salaries 100 times higher—some \$14,000 a month.

Tensions are clearly mounting. In an extraordinary article on January 6, columnist John Roughan warned the Howard government against further alienating Solomon Islanders. Roughan, who is the founder of the Solomon Islands Development Trust and an open supporter of the Australian intervention, wrote:

“[T]here has been a sea change in how people now view RAMSI and what they witnessed and experienced on RAMSI’s original arrival, 24 July 2003... Of course Solomon Islanders want the murderers [of Dunning] captured, tried and, if found guilty, given life sentences. But the question is how best to capture those responsible. The present strong-arm approach on its own is doomed to failure...”

“[G]aining people’s confidence is rarely accomplished using the business end of an M-14. The country has seen more than enough national suffering born of the gun, of lawlessness, of all the things that scarred it during our Social Unrest years of 1998-2003. They don’t want a return to that kind of life, ever.... The present dangerous situation must be nipped in the bud now. Such a situation helps no one, neither RAMSI nor Solomon Islanders. It’s fast becoming a no-win situation”.

As the decision to dispatch more Australian troops indicates, the Howard government has too much at stake to pull back now. The Solomon Islands operation was just the first step in Canberra’s broader ambitions to intervene more directly throughout the region. Any softening of its stance in Honiara would undermine demands for other Pacific Island countries, including Nauru, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, to accept the imposition of Australian officials.

In the Solomon Islands, the result will be deepening opposition to RAMSI that will take many different forms. Dunning is the first casualty of what is likely to become escalating resistance to the Australian occupation of the country.



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