

Australian government bullies PNG over airport security incident

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A security incident at an Australian airport involving Papua New Guinea (PNG) Prime Minister Michael Somare escalated into a full blown diplomatic row between the two countries after Canberra refused to issue an apology for the demeaning treatment.

On March 24, Somare was travelling back to the PNG capital Port Moresby via Brisbane after attending a Pacific Islands leaders' summit in New Zealand. At Brisbane airport, Australian officials insisted that Somare remove his belt and empty his pockets to comply with security provisions. Eventually he was even asked to take off his shoes. Somare complied but later told PNG TV: "I thought it was an insult to the leadership in our region."

PNG Foreign Minister Rabbie Namaliu presented a diplomatic note on March 28 to Australian High Commissioner Michael Potts demanding an apology from Australian Prime Minister John Howard within 24 hours. Namaliu's spokesman Brian Martins told the *Australian*: "We cannot rule out suspending diplomatic ties, but we hope it won't go to that extent."

The most significant aspect of what was a relatively trivial incident was the Australian government's response. Far from attempting to smooth ruffled feathers, Canberra deliberately inflamed the situation and refused to make any form of apology.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, speaking on talkback radio on March 31, condescendingly declared: "It happens to me when I go to other countries. I have to take off my belt and shoes from time to time. It's just the way of the world these days. It's not a question of trying to insult anybody."

Downer also declared: "Australia's traditionally a very egalitarian country, and therefore our laws apply to all people." To make the obvious point, Downer nor anyone else in the Howard government would dare to treat US President George Bush, for instance, in a similar "egalitarian" manner.

The response certainly smacked of imperial arrogance towards Australia's former colony and provoked a series of angry protests in PNG. Hundreds of demonstrators gathered outside the Australian High Commission in Port Moresby on March 31 and April 1 to demand a formal apology. A subsequent march in Lae, the country's second largest city, attracted 7,000 people.

The diplomatic clash continued to escalate. Canberra issued an official two-page response on April 1, pointedly refusing to make any apology and implying PNG was at fault for failing to consult the Australian High Commission in advance. Somare's chief of staff Leonard Louma replied in a letter to the media on April 7 contradicting the claim that Canberra had not been informed and pointing out that the prime minister had never experienced similar treatment at other airports.

The PNG government sent a second diplomatic note on April 7, again demanding an apology. It also suspended the first quarterly high-level meeting on the Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP) between senior officials from both governments, scheduled for next week.

PNG chief secretary Joshua Kalinoe warned that his country might scrap the ECP altogether and accept no more Australian aid. "Failure to receive a favourable response will lead to undesirable consequences in some aspects of our bilateral relationship," he told a press conference.

It is not surprising that the ECP reemerged as a bone of contention. The Howard government's contemptuous dismissal of Somare's objections over his treatment mirrors the way in which Canberra pressured Port Moresby to accept the ECP package.

Under the plan, Australia has deployed 210 police officers to PNG and 64 government officials to supervise the country's police force, courts, finance and planning agencies, customs and civil aviation at a cost of \$800 million over the next four years. In the name of promoting

“good governance”, Canberra is riding roughshod over PNG’s national sovereignty and tightening its grip over a country where Australian companies have significant investments.

From the outset, the PNG government objected to the ECP. Somare declared in 2003 that PNG was a sovereign country that did not need Australian officers to “run the show for us.” After branding the plan as “neo-colonial,” Somare caved in when the Howard government made clear that Australian aid would not continue unless the proposals were accepted in full. In all likelihood, Port Moresby will be compelled to back down again over the incident at Brisbane airport.

Downer, well aware that PNG is heavily dependent on Australian aid, offhandedly dismissed Kalinoe’s threats. “[Y]ou know, at the end of the day, when you do provide major aid programs to other countries, how they handle those aid programs is a matter for them. I mean, those countries can make up their own minds about whether they want meetings or don’t want meetings, and they’re sovereign. They can make their own decisions,” he told an ABC interviewer.

The whole affair reeks of diplomatic thuggery on the part of Canberra. In the manner of schoolyard bullies, Downer and Howard not only lord it over weaker, economically backward nations in the region, but revel in humiliating their leaders.

East Timor’s leaders have publicly complained that Howard is bullying their government into parting with the lion’s share of the oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. Having launched an Australian-led military intervention into the half-island in 1999 on the pretext of protecting the East Timorese, Canberra now insists that Dili accept Australia’s inequitable plan for exploiting the seabed resources. Australian officials have deliberately drawn out negotiations so as to maximise pressure on impoverished East Timor, which can ill afford any delays.

In 2003, the Howard government used the same tactic of withholding aid to compel the Solomon Islands government into formally accepting a virtual takeover of the small Pacific Island state. Australian police and troops remain on the ground and Australian officials effectively run the police, the prisons, finance and other aspects of the state apparatus. Nauru and Vanuatu have been faced with similar ultimatums, which are part of a far-reaching policy, by Canberra to assert its strategic and economic interests in the Asian Pacific region to the exclusion of its European and Asian rivals.

In late 2003, an incident like that involving Somare took

place in the Solomons. The country’s Governor-General John Iri Lapli complained of being treated as “a common criminal” after being searched by two Australian police officers. In that case, Australian officials, concerned to keep up appearances, issued a formal apology. Now entrenched in the Solomons, there is no guarantee that they would do the same again.

Commenting on Canberra’s reaction to Somare’s complaints, PNG academic Allan Patience commented: “Australia was probably hinting that it is losing patience with the Somare government over its ongoing reluctance to engage in comprehensive reforms to improve political integrity and good governance in PNG.” To put it more bluntly, the Howard government’s deliberate rudeness is simply a way of pulling Somare into line and ensuring that he fully cooperates with Australian plans.

There are already indications that Somare is softening his stand. A spokesman declared on April 11 that the ECP was not being suspended. Rather a quarterly meeting of senior officials was to be cancelled and the deployment of in-line officers put on hold. Australian police deployments would continue. In a rather empty act of defiance, Somare has re-routed an overseas trip so as not to stop over in Australia.

On April 13, the credit rating agency Standard & Poor’s stepped into the dispute behind Canberra. “There doesn’t seem to be a serious intention to cancel the aid program. Nevertheless, any serious move to cancel this program is likely to affect Papua New Guinea’s rating,” the agency warned. Alarmed at the financial consequences, PNG Treasurer Bart Philemon exclaimed: “I think that the ECP should be kept out of that”.

It is unlikely the matter will go much further. Nevertheless what at first appeared to be a minor diplomatic squabble has underlined once again the determination of Australian imperialism to impose its agenda on its Pacific neighbours.



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