

On-the-spot report from Honiara

Australian occupation creates a “time-bomb” in Solomon Islands

A correspondent
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The following is the edited version of an on-the-spot report sent to the WSWS by a Solomon Islands resident, explaining the background to the eruption of social unrest in the country’s capital, Honiara, on April 18. Snyder Rini’s election as prime minister by members of parliament on that day flew in the face of an April 5 general election that ousted the previous, notoriously corrupt, Australian-backed government of Sir Allen Kemakeza, in which Rini had served as deputy prime minister. After eight days of being protected by troops and police from the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), Rini was forced to resign in a bid to quell the discontent. Last week, MPs elected Manasseh Sogavare, a former prime minister, to replace Rini. Sogavare has this week sought to head off the growing anti-RAMSI sentiment by calling on Canberra to produce an “exit strategy” for the occupation force.

The correspondent refers to the 1998-2001 ethnic tension, which was triggered by an economic breakdown in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial meltdown, followed by the imposition of pro-market “restructuring” measures at the insistence of the Australian government. The resulting social tensions led to fighting between militias based on Guadalcanal, the main island, and Malaita, the second most populous island. The conflict provided the pretext for the RAMSI intervention in mid-2003.

I wish to thank WSWS for the statement, “Australian troops dispatched to Solomon Islands to suppress local population,” and hereby add my personal assessment of the recent events affecting the Solomon Islands since the advent of RAMSI in the country in 2003.

Firstly, the rioting and looting in Honiara is a clear

indication of RAMSI’s utter failure to address the issues of the 1998-2001 ethnic tension and ultimately the demands of the common people of the Solomon Islands. These demands include the call for RAMSI to arrest the “big fishes” in the former Kemakeza government, whom many knew were responsible for the corruption that brought our nation to its knees. Kemakeza, the then prime minister, who was known during the tension period to have served himself with huge sums of money as compensation payments, was one of these “big fishes”.

This corruption was common knowledge to the Solomon Islands public, and the failure of RAMSI to arrest these “big fishes” has created hatred and resentment toward RAMSI, as well as general dislike for the regime. In the public’s eyes, Kemakeza was and is still hiding behind the RAMSI shield. To a lot of people, he purposely and simply brought in Australia and RAMSI for his own safety.

Snyder Rini was Kemakeza’s sidekick in the former government and he being elected prime minister on April 18 outraged the public. It was the same old government smeared with corruption coming back to power and this did not go down well with the people.

This result prompted the angry crowd gathering outside parliament to call for Rini to step down immediately. It was past 12.00 noon when this call was made. They demanded that Rini step down by 6.00 pm.

Although prominent leaders like [Parliamentary Speaker] Sir Peter Kenilorea, [former prime minister] Bartholomew Ulufa’alu and the unsuccessful [opposition leader] Job Dudley Tausinga called for calm, the sight of RAMSI officers fully armed with protective gear, riot clubs, guns on their side, tear gas

launchers and so on, further intensified anger in the already sensitive crowd. They demanded that Tausinga's party come outside while they holed up Rini's party in the parliament house, pressing for his immediate resignation.

The situation got out-of-hand when RAMSI officers unprofessionally handled the situation. They roughed one member of the angry crowd and started firing tear-gas on them. The crowd then let loose by throwing the fired tear-gas canisters back at the RAMSI officers, followed by rocks and stones. RAMSI trucks were burnt down, rolled down the parliament hill or turned over in the parliament parking lot.

The local police, on the other hand, were totally unarmed and unprotected. They did not wear any riot protective gear on their chests like their RAMSI counterparts. This further angered the crowd, so they made RAMSI officers their main target. They pelted them with stones, rocks and anything they could lay their hands on.

The mishandling of the situation on parliament hill by RAMSI police led to the spill-over of the angry crowd into the Point Cruz, Chinatown and Kukum shopping centres, where Chinese shops were the main target of rioters, looters and arsonists.

Hundreds of rioters broke into the Chinese shops, looted and burnt them down to the ground. This was the worst riot the Solomon Islands has ever gone through. Personally, I would rate the damage caused by the ethnic tension in 1998-2001 as well below the magnitude of the two-day destruction carried out.

Chinatown was turned into a mass of ashes, littered with burnt metal sheets, crumbled concrete walls, broken glasses, burnt RAMSI vehicles and so. It was no longer the Chinatown I once knew; beautiful and bustling with economic activity. It was simply a sad and pitiful sight.

Along the Kukum Highway the glamorous \$60 million Pacific Casino Hotel, home of wealthy foreigners and elites, including RAMSI officers, was reduced to a crumble of dust. Burnt RAMSI vehicles lay at the entrance and burnt cars and other vehicles littered the hotel parking lot.

Similarly at the back of the highway, the few Chinese-owned shops hidden from public view were looted and torched without any concern for humanity.

In the final analysis, I would say that the incident

portrays a negative picture of RAMSI. Much of its highly-published "Boomerang Aid" [Australian aid programs] seems to have gained nothing for the islands. It did nothing to sooth the desperation of Solomon Islanders for good governance and leadership and elimination of the corruption syndrome. It was these frustrations that resulted in the two-day riot.

RAMSI is said to be a success story, but that success story was littered in just two days and that only indicates failure. While many RAMSI officers were enjoying themselves in the Lime Lounge at Point Cruz, they didn't understand the desperation of the local people. Though people assumed that law and order was already restored, nothing was done to improve the living conditions of people so that they could feel comfortable living in a fast-changing society. Many Solomon Islanders are still painfully struggling to make ends meet and their frustrations will continue.

The Solomon Islands is therefore sitting on a time-bomb and while this is not properly addressed by the government and those who claimed to come and assist us, the future of the Solomon Islands will remain uncertain.



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