

New Zealand government reinforces Solomons intervention

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A 24-hour visit to the Solomon Islands by New Zealand Defence Minister Phil Goff on April 27 underscored the punitive and oppressive nature of the Australian-led intervention in the tiny Pacific country. In the wake of disturbances in Honiara, the capital, the New Zealand Labour government rushed a 100-strong contingent of heavily-armed military and police reinforcements to assist the Australian government in suppressing political protests and rioting.

While the rioting erupted in response to the widely perceived rigging of the selection of Snyder Rini as prime minister, it reflected broader resentment over deepening social inequality and the occupation of the country by RAMSI, the so-called Regional Assistance Mission mounted by Australia and New Zealand. Since 2003, RAMSI has operated a neo-colonial administration, controlling police, prisons, the legal system, government finances and other key departments. It has propped up a corrupt local business and political elite while enforcing pro-market economic “reforms”.

On the eve of his trip, Goff declared, “mob rule simply isn’t going to be tolerated” and warned, “those that engage in it will find that there are consequences.” He echoed Prime Minister Helen Clark, who said on April 20, when announcing the military deployment, that the rapid response would send “a very clear signal” to the “rioters” in Honiara. This was a notable shift from Labour’s line that its intervention in 2003 had been for the purposes of “peacekeeping”.

The Clark government is anxious about the possible emergence of popular opposition movements throughout the Pacific region—including within New Zealand. Goff made this explicit, saying “we’ve got to recall that Paris hasn’t been free of similar acts of violence and arson, and even in our country, for reasons

that seemed inexplicable at the time and since, we saw the ‘80s riot in Queen St.” This was a reference to a 1984 riot that erupted during a demonstration in Auckland over the free-market policies being implemented by the Lange-Douglas Labour government, which Goff emphatically supported.

Goff’s trip was also intended to clearly establish that New Zealand has its own strategic interests in the region and will not simply play second fiddle to its larger Australian neighbour. While the two regional powers often collaborate, the New Zealand ruling elite is wary of Canberra’s increasing tendency to act unilaterally. On a number of occasions, Clark has positioned New Zealand as the “honest broker” with Pacific governments whenever they have perceived Australia as overstepping the mark.

According to a recent op-ed piece by Audrey Young, the *New Zealand Herald’s* political editor, Clark “negotiated hard” with Howard over the terms of RAMSI’s establishment in 2003 to ensure it was a multi-lateral organisation and not just a tool of Canberra. New Zealand had insisted on the approval of the Pacific Islands Forum and the participation of as many island states as possible, as well as an “invitation” from the Solomons government. According to Young, RAMSI “was an important way for New Zealand to show it would be more than happy to pull its weight when justified; and for Australia to show it was capable of multilateralism when justified”.

Goff went to the Solomons just a week after returning from Washington where he met with US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and senior Pentagon officials. Goff took the opportunity to impress the Bush administration with the tough line being taken by the intervention forces, later boasting that the fortuitous timing of the meetings meant he had been able to brief

Pentagon chiefs “on the Solomon riots and the need for stronger intervention by our military and police”.

The wider purpose of Goff’s Washington meetings was to highlight New Zealand’s engagement in maintaining “security” in the South Pacific. According to the *New Zealand Herald’s* Young, who covered the visit, Goff set out to steer the bilateral talks away from the nuclear policy issues, which have at times been a sticking point in the relationship, and onto New Zealand’s “real contribution in the (Pacific) region”.

Speaking at the National Defence University, Goff acknowledged that New Zealand’s nuclear-free status, adopted in 1985, imposed “constraints on some aspects of our defence relationship”. However, Goff emphasised “our ability to work together in support of our common international and regional security interests”.

Goff later declared that New Zealand’s “disproportionate effort” in Afghanistan, where it contributes more troops on a per capita basis than other countries, was particularly noted in Washington. So too, was the recent commitment to extend the term of the 120-member armed forces Provincial Reconstruction Team there.

Within days of Goff’s Pentagon meeting, Clark announced an increase in the size of the Solomons military and police contingent to over 100, in addition to the 82 already stationed there. According to Clark, the extra troops were required “to help give broader coverage of Honiara, better protection of infrastructure, and greater capacity to investigate and apprehend key offenders”.

Under the pretence of “maintaining order”, the Australian and New Zealand forces interfered directly in Solomons affairs, arresting three opposition MPs, imposing a dawn-till-dusk curfew, rounding up so-called “ring leaders” (by then 106 Solomon Islanders had been imprisoned) and establishing an atmosphere of martial law that included a virtual lockdown of the parliament building.

By the time of Goff’s visit, Rini had resigned as prime minister, and was to complain subsequently that the New Zealand defence minister had purposefully snubbed him by not inviting him to any talks. Goff, however, did meet with Manasseh Sogavare, who is now prime minister, and eight of his MPs. Goff used the meeting to issue a warning shot to Sogavare,

lecturing him that New Zealand was “against corruption in any form” and would act to stamp it out.

At the end of his visit, Goff confirmed that the RAMSI operation would operate indefinitely, saying it was “never a short-term measure”. He declared: “We’ve got to continue to work not only to change the institutions, but the culture of behaviour and culture of governance.” All of which was intended to signal that Australia and New Zealand are determined to maintain their neo-colonial control for as long as they see fit, regardless of the intentions of Sogavare or anyone who replaces him as prime minister.



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