

Australian government steps up threats against PNG, Solomon Islands

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Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer announced yesterday that Papua New Guinea (PNG) government ministers, including Prime Minister Michael Somare, would be banned from visiting Australia. At the same time, he rescinded an invitation previously issued to PNG's defence minister and indicated that the annual ministerial forum due to be held in December could be cancelled. Downer also threatened to cut Australian aid to the impoverished nation, warning that the government will not just "shovel aid into neighbouring countries".

Canberra's sanctions and threats come amid rising tensions in the South Pacific and an ongoing standoff between the Howard government and the Solomon Islands' prime minister Manasseh Sogavare. Faced with mounting popular hostility throughout the region to its neo-colonial agenda, the Australian government has demonstrated that it is not prepared to tolerate any opposition and will use increasingly aggressive measures to ensure that neighbouring governments toe the line.

Canberra's unprecedented ban on PNG ministerial visits follows the PNG government's refusal to deport the Solomon Islands' attorney-general Julian Moti, who was arrested in PNG on September 29 as he was en route from Singapore to the Solomons. Canberra demanded Moti's extradition on child sex tourism charges, but Prime Minister Somare sided with the Solomons' government and publicly encouraged the attorney-general to leave PNG.

Moti subsequently departed for the Solomons on board a PNG military plane. He was arrested by Australian police after he landed, brought before an Australian judge and is being detained in an Australian-run prison against the wishes of the Solomons' government. The exact circumstances of Moti's flight from PNG remain unclear. Moti's lawyer has claimed that he was forced to leave the country by PNG soldiers, while Somare has denied any knowledge of the military's alleged involvement.

The prime minister expressed his "deep regret" over the incident last Friday, and has promised an investigation into the affair. According to the *Australian*, intelligence agencies

in Canberra are conducting their own examination and "officials have indicated they are sceptical of PNG's claim that it did not know about the pre-dawn defence force flight". Downer has called on all those involved in the flight to be punished, and has accused Somare of failing to maintain "good governance".

Canberra's displeasure with the PNG government has nothing to do with Moti and his flight to the Solomons, just as its pursuit of Moti himself has nothing to do with his alleged sex crime. In both cases the Solomons' attorney-general has been used as a pretext for the Howard government's pursuit of Australia's strategic interests in the South Pacific.

Canberra dispatched hundreds of soldiers, police, and other Australian personnel to the Solomon Islands in 2003 in a military intervention that ensured the Howard government's direct control of the country. The Sogavare government was targeted for removal after it failed to sufficiently subordinate itself to the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) authorities. The growing conflict erupted to the surface when the government expelled Australian high commissioner Patrick Cole from the Solomons last month for conspiring with the opposition.

Canberra's drive for "regime change" in Honiara saw a government and media witch-hunt against Moti over a child sex allegation dating back to 1997, for which he had been acquitted by a Vanuatu court. Manipulating Australia's child sex tourism laws, and ignoring its provisions against double jeopardy, the Howard government used the case as a means of destabilising the Sogavare government, as well as sabotaging an official inquiry into riots that erupted in Honiara last April. Moti was centrally involved in the investigation which threatened to expose RAMSI's responsibility for provoking the violence, and the extent of anti-RAMSI sentiment in the Solomons.

Somare's public statements opposing Moti's extradition to Australia have been followed by Sogavare's threat to expel Australian RAMSI personnel and replace them with forces from the UN or unnamed rival countries. It is

precisely such an outcome that the Australian government has been desperate to prevent. Canberra has been trying to isolate Sogavare and prevent any alliance of Pacific governments aimed at establishing alliances with other powers against Australia's regional hegemony.

Tensions could openly emerge next week, with the 16-member Pacific Island Forum meeting in Fiji. The Howard government has signalled that it wants the reappointment of Australian diplomat Greg Unwin as secretary-general of the organisation. Canberra bullied the other member-states into approving Unwin in 2003, after reportedly promising he would only serve one term. But the Solomons, Fiji, Vanuatu, and PNG have said they will advance their own candidate to challenge Howard's man.

Canberra's sanctions against the PNG government point to the stakes involved. Hugh White, professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University, described the ministerial travel ban as a "pretty radical diplomatic step", and warned that Canberra's "inability to manage the bilateral relationship with PNG and the Solomon Islands more constructively threatens Australia's rather ambitious agenda for regional reconstruction".

The Howard government has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in RAMSI, and promoted it as a model for intervention in other so-called "failed states". When the prime minister announced a significant expansion of the armed forces two months ago, he openly raised the possibility of Australian intervention in Fiji, Vanuatu, and PNG, which he described as "inherently unstable". Any setback in the Solomons would make such operations vastly more difficult.

While the political and media establishment unanimously defend the "humanitarianism" of Australia's interventions in the Solomon Islands and the wider region, Kevin Rudd, the Labor Party's foreign affairs spokesman, openly admitted the forces actually motivating Canberra's actions.

"Because we have such large interests at stake here, not least the presence of such a large number of Australian personnel on the ground, it's time for private and quiet and sensible diplomacy to prevail here," he declared on Saturday. "What I'm deeply concerned about, and spoken about a lot in the past, is that if Australia ceases to be the security stabilising force in Melanesia, and more widely across the South Pacific, we then create a security vacuum. And I'm deeply concerned about where states within the region then turn elsewhere. What other countries they go to, to fill that security vacuum. That's not in Australia's long-term national security interests."

RAMSI has always been driven by Canberra's need to prevent rival powers from gaining a foothold in the Solomons. When initially dispatching it in 2003, the Howard

government declined a French offer to contribute troops and police to RAMSI. Evidence later emerged that the government's initial plans to intervene may have been hastened by the knowledge that Solomons' authorities were considering inviting Indonesian troops into the country.

The Australian ruling class has always viewed the strategically significant South Pacific as its own sphere of influence and attempted to ensure its domination of the region's considerable natural resources. With the support of the British Empire before World War II and US imperialism after 1945, successive Australian governments have manoeuvred to marginalise the influence of rival powers. But inter-imperialist antagonisms have intensified throughout the world—most sharply in the Middle East and Central Asia with the eruption of US militarism—and the South Pacific is no exception.

Taiwan in particular is being targeted for its escalating role in the Solomons Islands—one of several Pacific states extending diplomatic recognition to Taiwan rather than Beijing, and receiving, in return, significant amounts of Taiwanese aid.

The *Sydney Morning Herald's* editorial last Friday accused Taiwan of bribing the Solomons' parliament to keep Sogavare in power. "[R]eports were coming in from Honiara of gatherings at which Mr Sogavare's group was handing over wads of cash to MPs ahead of the no-confidence vote," the newspaper claimed, without providing any proof or details. "Considering Mr Sogavare's strong support for Taiwan, including a speech at the United Nations supporting its case for a UN seat, the finger of suspicion inevitably points to Taipei. While a lot of Australians see Taiwan as a brightening torch of democracy in Greater China, in our own neighbourhood it risks appearing more like a rogue nation."

Gary Song-Huann Lin, a Taiwanese official in Canberra, denied the allegations in a pointed reply published in the *Herald* the following day. "These kinds of prejudiced assertions will only lead to the alienation of friendly countries like Indonesia, the Solomon Islands, and Taiwan," he stated. "Australia will have to seek Taiwan's good faith and cooperation if the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands is to be successful".



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