

Canberra prepares for possible military intervention in Fiji

Rick Kelly
29 November 2006

Amid stepped up threats by the Fijian military to overthrow the government of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, Canberra is taking aggressive steps to protect its interests in the country and the region. The Howard government will host a meeting of the 16 Pacific Islands Forum foreign ministers on Friday in order to invoke the “Biketawa Declaration,” which authorises regional intervention into the affairs of member states, potentially including military intervention.

The Howard government drafted the declaration six years ago in order to provide a multilateral cover for its neo-colonial operations in the region. Its application in the Fijian crisis may see yet another Australian military deployment in the south Pacific, alongside those in Solomon Islands and Tonga.

Three Australia warships, with at least 100 soldiers on board, remain stationed outside Fijian waters. Elite SAS troops have had their leave cancelled and a Sydney-based commando task group has been placed on standby. An unknown number of troops, possibly including SAS, are already in the Australian High Commission in Suva, after secretly entering the country on November 3.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer insists that these preparations are aimed at evacuating Australian citizens in the event of a coup, and dismissed as “entirely hypothetical” a question as to how he would respond to a possible Fijian government request for military intervention. He said he hoped the crisis would be resolved by the Fijian government and military, rather than “through a clash between militaries”.

Canberra’s calculations are solely driven by the strategic and economic concerns of the Australian ruling elite. Fiji is an important country in a region claimed by Canberra as its sphere of influence, and was one of several south Pacific nations Howard listed as potential targets for intervention earlier this year when he announced a significant expansion of the Australian

military and federal police.

Tensions in Fiji heightened last week when military head, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, issued another ultimatum to Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. The government has until early next week to meet a series of “non-negotiable” demands, including the withdrawal of two contentious pieces of legislation—one providing amnesty to leaders of the 2000 coup and the other establishing indigenous ownership over coastal areas. Both bills are designed to appeal to Qarase’s communalist indigenous Fijian constituency, but are opposed by sections of the national ruling elite and the Indo-Fijian minority.

Intense international pressure is being brought to bear on the Fijian military. Canberra has advised tourists and visitors to consider leaving the country, and families of Australian personnel have been evacuated. In a move condemned by the military, the Australian, British, and American ambassadors yesterday went to the main army barracks and spoke with senior commanders.

UN secretary-general Kofi Annan also weighed in, warning the military that if they launched a coup, Fijian peacekeeping forces around the world would be asked to return home. The withdrawal of these international deployments would represent a serious economic blow to many Fijian soldiers and their families who depend on UN salaries. A significant portion of the country’s income is derived from remittances from soldiers, as well as mercenaries, stationed in the Middle East and other world conflicts.

The New Zealand government arranged a meeting between Bainimarama and Qarase in Auckland this morning in an effort to resolve the long running standoff. Before the discussion even began, however, Bainimarama declared his unwillingness to back down. “It’s very simple: [Qarase] comes with a yes or a no to our demands,” he stated. After two hours of talks,

Bainimarama flew back to Fiji without issuing a public statement. Qarase later called the discussion a “good start” but admitted that no conclusions were reached.

Reiterating previous warnings, senior Fijian military figures have declared that the mobilisation of 3,000 members of the Territorial Forces and Reserves on Saturday was aimed against a potential Australian intervention.

“The Biketawa Agreement is now being exploited by countries like Australia and New Zealand to facilitate their foreign policy and front for neo-colonialism,” Major Neumi Leweni said on November 16. “This policy is now unveiling right here on our doorstep and we should take heed. We should learn from the MSG [Melanesian Spearhead Group] countries that have experienced foreign intervention and whether it has helped them.”

This was a reference to the crisis in the Solomon Islands. Australian police and officials in the Regional Assistance Mission for Solomon Islands (RAMSI) control the country’s state apparatus. Canberra’s 2003 takeover of the Solomons was carried out under the nominal auspices of the Pacific Islands Forum and the Biketawa Declaration. Sections of the Fijian ruling elite and military are clearly concerned about the consequences of a similar operation in their country.

Canberra fears that a military coup in Fiji would deepen the regional crisis and further undermine its increasingly reckless strategy aimed at shutting out rival powers, such as China, by taking over the Pacific countries’ levers of state power.

The Howard government has no sympathy for the two contentious bills at the centre of the military-government standoff. The amnesty bill for the 2000 coup leaders is considered a potentially destabilising move and the land rights legislation cuts across Canberra’s efforts to privatise Pacific land and promote investment opportunities for Australian corporations. Howard is strongly opposed, however, to the rest of Bainimarama’s demands, above all the dismissal of Fiji’s police commissioner Andrew Hughes.

Hughes, a former Australian Federal Police officer, was appointed in June 2003 and has been Canberra’s man on the ground in Fiji ever since. He has played a highly political, and provocative, role in the present crisis. On October 30, he confiscated a shipload of ammunition ordered by the army and declared it would not be released while threats were being made against the government. After soldiers seized the cargo, Hughes threatened them with arrest.

The police commissioner has also moved to charge Bainimarama with sedition. Last Thursday Hughes ordered a raid on the office of President Ratu Josefa Iloilo shortly after he had met with Bainimarama. Iloilo reportedly responded by banning Fijian police from presidential grounds, while Bainimarama compared the incident to last month’s raid by Australian police on the office of Solomon Islands’ Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare.

New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark yesterday revealed that her government had turned down a request to arrest Bainimarama, presumably issued by Hughes, while the military commander was visiting the country.

Hughes has accused Bainimarama of being a front-man for unnamed individuals and organisations, and in a press conference last Thursday, angrily threatened to expose and arrest these figures. According to journalist Michael Field, Qarase’s indigenous land ownership bill is “strongly opposed by tourism operators and several key figures, including a prominent American, [who] have access to the Commodore”. Other reports have alleged that prominent indigenous figures in politics and business are also backing the military.

Bainimarama has demanded that all criminal investigations against him and his colleagues cease, and warned Hughes to leave the country before things “blow up”. After receiving anonymous threats, the police commissioner has reportedly returned his family to Australia and moved himself to an undisclosed location.

The situation in Fiji’s capital, Suva, remains very tense. Armed Fijian soldiers are currently patrolling the streets and the military has just announced a “training exercise” scheduled for tonight. “The exercise is in anticipation of any foreign intervention and the RFMF [Fijian military] is taking all precautionary measures,” a statement declared.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact