

New Zealand threatens to cut aid to the Solomon Islands

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New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters used a visit to the Solomon Islands last week to threaten Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare with the withdrawal of aid unless his government ended its attempts to rein in the activities of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission (RAMSI) and acceded to demands over key appointments.

According to the *New Zealand Herald* on July 11, Peters spent a “tense hour” talking to Sogavare about the “contentious issues” in a meeting that coincided with the swearing in of constitutional lawyer Julian Moti as attorney-general. Mohammed Jahir Khan, a Fijian, had already been installed as police commissioner. Both appointments have been opposed by Canberra. Australian police officer Shane Castles was dumped as police commissioner after he waged a vendetta against Moti.

The Australian government has been seeking Moti’s extradition on child sex charges, dating back to 1997 in Vanuatu, where they have already been dismissed. As far as Canberra is concerned, Moti’s real crime is that he helped establish a Commission of Inquiry into the causes of riots in Honiara in April 2006, following national elections. The investigation threatens to expose RAMSI’s role in provoking the unrest to create the conditions for the deployment of more Australian personnel.

In 2003, New Zealand supported the Australian-led armed intervention into the Solomons as a means for realising its own predatory ambitions in the Pacific. RAMSI was the legal-political umbrella under which troops, police, administrators and private businesses from the two regional powers virtually took over the key levers of the Solomons’ state apparatus, and it is regarded as a model for future interventions elsewhere.

RAMSI currently comprises about 250 police from

10 Pacific nations—35 from New Zealand as well as three in key managerial and official posts. More than 6,300 people—out of a population of only 500,000—have been arrested in the Solomons since 2003. Last year, Prime Minister Helen Clark declared that New Zealand’s involvement would be for “as long as it takes” and claimed the law-and-order situation had been “transformed out of sight”.

Relations with Australia have become increasingly bitter amid growing opposition in the Solomons to RAMSI’s neo-colonial operations. While not wanting a complete break in relations, Sogavare is seeking to curb Canberra’s influence over his government. A review of RAMSI’s operations, set up by the Pacific Islands Forum last year in response to Sogavare’s criticisms, is due to report back this month.

Peters’s comments last week underlined the real character of the RAMSI intervention. He was by turns pedantic, patronising and menacing. “We have to put our cards on the table here and get a clear declaration of understanding and support of RAMSI by the Solomon Islands government and indeed every politician in the Solomons,” he told a press briefing.

Warning that aid came with conditions, Peters added: “We want to be a good neighbour in the Pacific but, whilst we don’t give aid in a tied fashion on a criteria (sic) requiring certain responses from them, nevertheless aid we give has a certain series of principles attached to it and good governance is a critical one in the view of the New Zealand government.”

“Good governance” is the code word used by Wellington and Canberra to describe those regimes and policies that coincide with their own economic and strategic agendas.

Hailing RAMSI’s achievements, Peters declared

there was no doubt the Solomons would be in a “critically adverse” situation if RAMSI were not there. New Zealand would be “very concerned,” he said, if the situation deteriorated while the Solomon Islands government “ignored its friend’s advice”. To drive home the point, he added: “If we’ve got points of objection then let’s hear it now.”

Peters was particularly incensed at plans to end the current monopoly of arms, and immunity from prosecution, enjoyed by RAMSI police. Khan has announced he wants to re-arm local police and has sought \$US2.6 million from the budget for that purpose. Peters said New Zealand would find it “hard to stomach” any proposals to “strip RAMSI personnel of protection”. “I don’t think that [Sogavare’s] under any illusion, foreign countries couldn’t accept that,” he declared.

Peters further challenged the appointment of Moti and Khan, saying Sogavare had previously said he wanted Solomon Islands nationals in key positions. “My point to him was ‘you’ve just got two paramount key appointments that are to do with any good governance operation, chief of police and attorney-general, and they are both foreigners, and how does that square with your statements to me last year’?”

Responding to Sogavare’s claims that no suitable locals were available, Peters declared: “I have to tell you that I was alarmed at that. The interpretation of those statements would suggest there is some confusion as to the separation of powers in that you had to have servants loyal to the government to occupy those positions.” Peters sought assurances that RAMSI would not be affected by the appointments.

All of these comments reek of gross hypocrisy. The Australian and New Zealand governments have ridden roughshod over the national independence and constitution of the Solomons Islands. Peters’s concerns have nothing to do with the niceties of constitutional law. Rather he is seeking to ensure that the top posts continue to be held by servants loyal to Canberra and Wellington.

Moreover, Peters’s own position as foreign minister is politically, if not constitutionally, dubious. He is the leader of a minority right-wing party, NZ First, in the ruling Labour-led coalition in Wellington. Under his deal with Labour, Peters insisted on the unprecedented arrangement whereby he remains a leading minister,

but outside cabinet, responsible to no one and free to be as loyal or disloyal to the elected government as it suits him.

Peters justified his threat to withdraw aid with the populist pitch: “[W]e have people who need to be at work at 5 o’clock in the morning to pay taxes to cover this recovery. Let’s understand our commitment to them back in New Zealand.”

New Zealand politicians periodically boast that the Solomon Islands is the country’s principal bilateral aid recipient. The official NZAid contribution rose from \$16.1 million in 2004/05 to \$21.1 million by 2007/08. A substantial portion of this “aid” is spent on the salaries of New Zealand personnel, rather than providing badly needed social services. This annual figure was less than the \$34 million lump sum handed over to the wealthy private yachting syndicate that unsuccessfully challenged for the America’s Cup in Valencia last month.

Overall, New Zealand’s aid budget remains very small. Proportionately New Zealand lags behind most other OECD nations, spending just 0.27 percent of its gross national income (GNI) on foreign aid.

In the end, Peters walked away from his meeting with Sogavare with empty hands. He told the media that the meeting “wasn’t the easiest” and that his objective was “to make sure there was no doubt about where New Zealand stood ... Whilst we were committed to being a good neighbour, that wasn’t at all (sic) cost.” Behind the open threat of cutting aid, Wellington and Canberra are undoubtedly considering other plans to undermine the Sogavare government.



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