

“Policing the neighbourhood”—Australia’s new para-military police

Part 2

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This is the conclusion of a two-part series on the Australian Federal Police. Part 1 was posted on September 27.

The real face of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) as a para-military arm of Canberra’s neo-colonial policy has nowhere been more graphically demonstrated than in the Solomon Islands.

The *New Matilda* online magazine has published fresh evidence about the AFP’s role in the April 18-19, 2006 riots in Honiara, the Solomons’ capital. These riots, which began outside parliament house and culminated in the burning down of the city’s Chinatown and other commercial and tourism buildings, provided the justification for the dispatch of more than 400 Australian, New Zealand and other troops and police, bolstering the ongoing security contingent of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) to more than 1,000.

The WSWS has previously reported evidence that suggests that Australian forces may have deliberately provoked the rioting to create the conditions for the Howard government to reinforce the RAMSI operation following a general election in which its favoured candidate, Prime Minister Allen Kemakeza, was defeated.

After newly-elected MPs defied the thrust of the election outcome by voting to install Snyder Rini, Kemakeza’s deputy, as prime minister, Solomon Islanders reacted with outrage, generally believing the parliamentary vote to have been rigged through corruption and bribery. An angry crowd converged on parliament to demand Rini’s resignation.

Luke Johnston, an Australian NGO worker who was at parliament, told *New Matilda* he had not spoken out before because of fear of retribution from Australian authorities. He said the crowd that gathered outside parliament to hear the announcement of the new prime minister was agitated but not violent. The people were willing to negotiate—until the AFP’s riot squad stepped in.

“These guys [the AFP’s Operational Response Group] came flying down the driveway at full speed, right towards the crowd. There were two or possibly three Land-cruisers full with all the kit: bullet-proof vests, big shields, lots of weapons. The crowd just scattered. That was the first turning point. The second one was when they cleared the driveway, they started manhandling people. The first physical contact was made by the AFP officers. They weren’t brutal, but they were shoving and pushing, and that’s when people got cranky,” Johnston told the magazine.

“Then they [the police] tried to bust the PM out. They rushed him out to the car under guard of the riot squad, and that’s when the first stone came. The police began firing stuff, and that really set the crowd abuzz, because it sounds and looks like guns. They started freaking, shouting ‘you’re shooting us’. They went mad, just hysterical, and they trashed every vehicle, and they ran down the hill and started burning things down,” he said.

The police then withdrew and seemed to allow the burning and looting

to proceed. “So I had to stand on my verandah for two nights with a crowbar with the whole town abandoned to these mobs, which just grew and grew, and watch as [the police] dealt with the situation from the air. They put the helicopter over the house and they were firing tear gas out of the helicopter.” (For the *New Matilda* interview and series see: <http://www.newmatilda.com/home/articledetailmagazine.asp?ArticleID=2488> <http://www.newmatilda.com/home/default.asp>)

The *New Matilda* series also drew attention to a World Vision submission to the current Senate inquiry into Australian “peacekeeping operations”. The submission included claims by serving AFP officers that International Deployment Group (IDG) members of the ADF used non-approved munitions during the Honiara riots, and were instructed to fire at people’s heads or shoot them in the back as they fled. World Vision’s submission welcomed the AFP’s participation in RAMSI as a “positive development”, while voicing concerns that these practices could undermine support for the operation.

According to World Vision, the munitions “included either 40 mm bean bag rounds or 40 mm foam rounds, 12 gauge bean bag rounds, CS Gas and possibly Stinger grenades containing rubber balls. We understand that these munitions were used by IDG members on 18th April 2006 in Honiara, despite them not being approved use of force options at the time under Commissioner’s Order 3 (CO3). We further understand that on 19th April, CO3 was retrospectively amended for a 28-day period to permit the use of previously non-approved munitions.”

World Vision said its sources reported that an IDG Team Leader had given chilling instructions to Australian and New Zealand police officers in the Solomon Islands. He “reportedly informed participants that, from his experience in PNG [Papua New Guinea], a person’s neck was a good place to aim with a 12 gauge bean bag round, since this would render the person unconscious, and that shooting people in the back as they were fleeing was also acceptable.”

During a Senate committee public hearing in Melbourne, World Vision representatives were admonished for attracting media attention to “specific grievances”, and the committee refused to pursue the claims. Justice Minister David Johnston said he was satisfied that the claims had been investigated internally, but a World Vision spokesman said no eye witnesses had been interviewed in the internal probe, including the officers who spoke to the organisation.

The Howard government and the AFP have insisted that the police conduct during the Honiara riots constituted an exemplary display of the AFP’s new role. In the June 2006 edition of *AFP News*, the agency’s newsletter, AFP Commissioner Mick Keelty said the response by AFP members “would be remembered as a very proud moment in the AFP’s history”. He described the “bravery and courage” shown by police officers as an “inspiration to us all at the AFP”. They “did an incredible

job in extremely volatile circumstances, exercising enormous restraint and putting their own safety at risk to protect others”.

As the WSWS has documented, the Howard government has sought to block or derail the Solomon Islands government’s own commission of inquiry into the Honiara riots. Its campaign has included attempts to arrest and extradite the country’s attorney-general, Julian Moti, on trumped-up statutory rape charges (see “Solomon Islands government rebuts Canberra’s child sex allegations against attorney-general”).

The fresh evidence raises many further questions about the IDG’s part in the Honiara riots. Did AFP commanders provoke the disturbances and then stand aside while Honiara burnt, in order to give the Howard government a pretext to fly in more troops to fortify the RAMSI intervention? Were orders given to use potentially lethal force? Were those orders retrospectively authorised? Has a high-level cover-up taken place?

Commissioner Keelty has referred to the AFP becoming a “pseudo-gendarmerie” of Australian foreign policy. The same could be said of its growing para-military and political role domestically.

As the Howard government has turned to military and police interventions in the Asia-Pacific regions, it has also dramatically escalated the AFP’s powers, resources and activity at home.

This was on display at the recent Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Sydney. According to official sources, some 450 AFP officers were deployed, alongside 2,500 state police and 1,500 military personnel, who included Special Air Services (SAS) commandos on standby.

The AFP said its contingent included dog squads (“canine explosives teams”), heavily-armed bodyguards (“personal protection officers”), intelligence analysts and airport security personnel. Commissioner Keelty described it as “a huge deployment, the biggest we have had”.

Because many police personnel removed their name tags, it was impossible to determine how many AFP officers were among the squads of armoured riot police, equipped with pistols, mace spray, taser guns, batons, shields, armoured vehicles, water cannon and helicopters, that surrounded the 10,000 demonstrators protesting against the Iraq war and the policies of the Howard government and the Bush administration.

In the lead-up to the summit, police commandos joined SAS and other military personnel in “anti-terrorism” exercises, featuring helicopters whirring through the city, gunboats speeding up Sydney Harbour and simulated live ammunition shootouts at railway stations.

Over recent months, the AFP has also played a leading part, as an adjunct to the military, in the Howard government’s takeover of Aboriginal townships and camps across the Northern Territory. Police have been stationed in scores of communities to enforce such measures as welfare cutoffs, medical checks on children, crackdowns on truancy and the seizures of control over houses and land.

The Howard government clearly regards the IDG’s experiences overseas as valuable for its internal operations. That was illustrated by the initial appointment as Northern Territory taskforce commander of Shane Castles, the former Australian police chief of the Solomon Islands RAMSI operation. Castles subsequently declined the Northern Territory post, and was replaced by an army officer, Major-General David Chalmers.

The connection between the foreign and domestic work of the AFP was discussed with rare candour in a June 27 Canberra ABC radio interview with acting Australian Capital Territory (ACT) police commissioner Andy Hughes, another AFP officer with neo-colonial experience. He had been forced to leave Fiji, where he had been installed as Police Commissioner, after last year’s military takeover in Fiji.

ABC host Ross Solly asked Hughes whether AFP officers had the “special set of skills” needed to go into indigenous areas, following reports that local people feared and opposed the intervention. Hughes replied: “Look I don’t think anyone is doubting that it is a big job. No

question of that. But, ACT Policing members and indeed AFP have had considerable experience in difficult environments including recently of course, East Timor, Solomon Islands, and other UN missions over time. We’re in Afghanistan, Sudan, so you know, the track record of AFP and Australian Policing generally in difficult circumstances is very good.”

The AFP was also centrally involved in the Howard government’s ultimately unsuccessful operation to frame-up Indian Muslim doctor, Mohammed Haneef, on terrorism charges. Haneef was detained for nearly two weeks without trial, and then stripped of his visa to block his release. Amid lurid media claims of a “doctors’ jihad network”—obviously fed by prejudicial police and government leaks—Prime Minister Howard and leading ministers declared that his arrest was a wake-up call to Australians that terrorists could strike on home soil.

Within three weeks the case collapsed. It emerged that prosecutors, acting on AFP information, had wrongly told a court that Haneef’s former mobile phone SIM card was found in the jeep that rammed into Glasgow airport in late June. Haneef’s lawyers released the transcripts of two AFP interviews with their client, providing a devastating picture of the AFP’s modus operandi: false, unsubstantiated and highly damaging allegations had been levelled against an innocent man and peddled to the media and the courts (see “Haneef police transcript exposes Australian government’s ‘terrorist conspiracy’ claims”).

The entire witchhunt was aimed at drumming up new public fears of terrorism in advance of the federal elections, due by the end of this year. As well, its aim was to justify the battery of unprecedented powers, such as detention and interrogation without trial, wide-ranging definitions of terrorism, the executive banning of organisations, semi-secret trials and the outlawing of urging support for resistance to Australian military interventions, handed to the AFP and its intelligence partner, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), since 2002.

Taken together, the scope and scale of the AFP’s “new paradigm of policing” amounts to the erection of the scaffolding of a police-state within Australia along with the para-military enforcement of Australian strategic and corporate interests throughout the region.

Concluded



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