

Solomon Islander shot dead by Australian-led intervention forces

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Military personnel with the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) shot and killed an unarmed local man and wounded another in an incident on the outskirts of the capital, Honiara, last Thursday.

The death comes amid heightened tensions generated by ongoing negotiations between rival parliamentarians over the formation of a new coalition government. National elections were held on August 4, only the second convened under RAMSI's watch. Opposition to the intervention force has steadily escalated in recent years and Thursday's killing—the first of its kind since RAMSI was first deployed in July 2003—will further fuel popular anger. The two soldiers involved, both Tongan nationals, cannot be arrested and prosecuted, even if it is established that a crime was committed, because all RAMSI personnel are immune from the Solomon Islands' legal system. They cannot even be questioned by Solomons' police unless prior permission is granted by the Tongan government.

Reports are still emerging about what led up to the shootings early on Thursday morning. According to statements issued by Solomon Island police commissioner Peter Marshall, Solomon Islands police, foreign police under RAMSI's Participating Police Force, and RAMSI troops were deployed to Titinge Ridge in West Honiara after about 50 residents were allegedly involved in an alcohol-fuelled fight between two groups. The local people subsequently turned on the police and soldiers and their three vehicles, throwing rocks.

“The situation deteriorated, the decision was to move the vehicles out and while they were reversing, rocks kept coming towards and on top of the vehicles,” Marshall told a press conference on Friday. “At that point two Tongan military personnel discharged their weapons... In terms of rock throwing, apart from significant damage to cars, helmets, visors and shields have also been significantly damaged.”

It remains unclear how many shots the RAMSI forces fired from their semi-automatic weapons. The man killed, former police officer in his 30s Harry Lolonga, was struck by two bullets, while the man wounded was shot once in the leg.

The police commissioner insisted there was “absolutely no link” to the election. This was contradicted, however, by an eyewitness who told the *Solomon Star* that the men shot had

been aligned with the area's winning candidate. Local journalist Dorothy Wickham told the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation that there was “scepticism of police assurances that the incident was not election related”.

Angry relatives of the man killed reportedly gathered on Thursday outside Honiara's National Referral Hospital, where the autopsy was being conducted. The newly elected representative of East Guadalcanal, Bradley Tovusia, told One Television News: “It is a cold blooded murder... I condemn this in the strongest way.”

The intervention force has quickly responded with a damage control operation. Senior Australian personnel, including RAMSI Special Coordinator Graeme Wilson, Participating Police Force chief Wayne Buchhorn, and RAMSI's military commander Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Langford, were sent to the area for what the Associated Press described as a “customary reconciliation” involving “compensation, traditional shell money and gift-giving to recompense family and friends”.

The last national election, held in 2006, was followed by rioting triggered by the nomination of a new prime minister, Snyder Rini, in what was widely believed to be a corrupted election process. Rini had been a key member of the government, whose hold on power was solely attributable to RAMSI's backing and which suffered enormous losses in the vote. RAMSI personnel and vehicles were targeted in the post-election violence, underscoring the mounting hostility towards the intervention force, especially from unemployed youth in Honiara's impoverished squatter settlements.

It remains to be seen whether any comparable violence will erupt following the latest political manoeuvres. As in 2006, rival camps of parliamentarians vying for government have formed and allegations of bribery and vote-buying are widespread. The parliamentary system bequeathed to the Solomon Islands by Britain, its colonial ruler until 1978, functions without any real party system. Many members of parliament are elected centrally on the basis of their communal and clan standing, and governments are formed through disparate coalitions often depending on patronage networks. The system is notoriously vulnerable to corrupt interventions by business interests, including foreign logging companies eager for lucrative contracts.

The biggest corrupting influence on Solomon Islands politics, however, remains RAMSI. In 2003 the Australian government deployed hundreds of troops, police, and government officials to the country and ever since has maintained effective control over its state apparatus, including police and prisons, legal system, finance department and central bank, and other sections of the public service.

RAMSI police and prosecutors arrested and detained several prominent public figures, including members of parliament who were critical of the intervention, on charges of involvement in the communal fighting which emerged in 1998-99 between rival militias from Malaita and Guadalcanal. Several were imprisoned for protracted periods, only to be acquitted for lack of evidence once a trial was finally convened. At the same time, several of those whom local people referred to as criminal “big fish” remained at liberty, apparently due to their public support for RAMSI. Prime Minister Alan Kemakeza was the most notorious example—he avoided arrest and remained in office only by functioning as Canberra’s puppet between July 2003 and the 2006 elections, serving as the figurehead for the nominally “sovereign” Solomon Islands while the Australian government maintained effective control over government policy.

When Manasseh Sogavare was elected prime minister in May 2006, he attempted to wrest from RAMSI some government control over the country’s public finances, only to face the Australian government’s outraged response. A provocative regime change campaign by Canberra followed, which included an Australian police-led raid on Sogavare’s office, the arrest of several of his ministers on bogus charges, and a vicious witch-hunt against his government’s attorney general, Julian Moti, on politically motivated statutory rape charges. The destabilisation drive culminated in a parliamentary no-confidence vote in December 2007 and the installation of a new pro-Australian government headed by Derek Sikua.

There is no question that Australian officials, including intelligence operatives, have been and remain deeply involved in the current election process, seeking above all to prevent Sogavare returning to office. During the election campaign, the former prime minister insisted that he was not opposed to RAMSI’s presence—while nevertheless insisting that its legal basis be revised. At the same time, he sought to appeal to anti-RAMSI sentiment by raising issues such as foreign officials breaking up local marriages through their affairs with Solomon Islands’ women. Sogavare also issued populist denunciations of past privatisation and deregulation measures recommended by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

The election was accompanied by a build-up of RAMSI troops and security personnel, including the New Zealand government’s deployment of an additional 37 soldiers. Australian Federal Police also staged high profile patrols in the days leading up to the ballot. Part of any genuine investigation into the circumstances of the killing would have to involve

serious probing into whether the Tongan troops’ decision to open fire was influenced or determined by directives issued by senior RAMSI personnel in the general emergency-type atmosphere whipped up around the election campaign and its aftermath by the intervention force.

It also remains to be explained why RAMSI military forces were deployed in the first place to deal with a domestic disturbance.

No-one should have any confidence that those responsible for Harry Lolonga’s death will be brought to justice. In February 2007, Australian troops shot dead two unarmed men in East Timor who were protesting their eviction from an internally displaced persons camp in Dili; the soldiers involved were not even reprimanded, let alone prosecuted. Like RAMSI, the intervention force in Timor secured immunity from the country’s laws on the insistence of the Australian government.

The Australian-led operation in the Solomons is driven by Canberra’s determination to secure its geo-strategic hegemony in the South Pacific and prevent rival powers, above all China, from gaining a foothold at its expense. RAMSI’s responsibility for the shooting death of an unarmed man has exposed the repressive character of the neo-colonial occupation, making clear the bogus nature of its official “humanitarian” pretext.

The Australian working class has a special responsibility to champion the democratic rights of the oppressed masses in the Solomon Islands and South Pacific, above all their right to live free from the domination of Canberra’s military-police intervention force. The Socialist Equality Party stands alone in demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Australian troops, police, and intelligence personnel from East Timor and the South Pacific. Every other political party contesting the federal election has remained silent, including on the issue of Harry Lolonga’s killing. This silence extends from the Labor and Liberal parties to the Greens—whose call for the return of Australian troops from Afghanistan is directly connected to their request that more forces be deployed to East Timor and Solomon Islands—and the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance, which has a long record of supporting Australian imperialist interventions in the region.

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