

Papua New Guinea police shoot protesting students, killing four

John Braddock**8 June 2016**

Four people have been killed and at least seven injured after police shot at protesting students today when they attempted to march from the University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby to the national parliament.

According to the media, the police blocked the march and demanded that the students hand over the student union president for arrest. When they refused, the police fired directly into the crowd. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation is reporting that about 2,000 students and staff are currently being held by police at the University of Technology in Lae, the country's second largest city.

The police attacks follow five weeks of protests by Papua New Guinea students.

On May 31 students demonstrated outside parliament as opposition parties attempted to call a no-confidence vote in the People's National Congress Party government. The students have been boycotting classes for a month, demanding Prime Minister Peter O'Neill step down to face corruption allegations.

Five hundred people attended the rally but, according to a student leader, Gerald Tulu Manu-Peni, police would not let them into parliament to watch the proceedings from the public gallery.

The University of Papua New Guinea's (UPNG) first semester has been suspended for 10 days over the protests, with the 4,000 students given 48 hours to vacate the university. The closure followed the occupation of the university by heavily-armed police, beginning May 17, in an effort by its administration, backed by the government, to suppress the student movement.

Protests have spread through other tertiary institutions, including the University of Goroka and Lae United, where students are also boycotting

classes. Students from at least six secondary schools joined the sit-in at UPNG.

The university council decided last Thursday to lift the suspension and resume classes from June 13. Acting Chancellor Dr. Nicholas Mann said the suspension should have given the students time to "think things through." The Student Representative Council (SRC) said it would meet to decide whether to resume the boycott.

The National Court earlier last week granted an application by the SRC for a judicial review of the order to vacate the campus. While the case has been playing out in the courts, most of the university's 2,400 resident students opted to remain on campus in defiance of the administration.

O'Neill has flatly refused to step down or cooperate with the corruption inquiry. Fraud squad police secured an arrest warrant for him two years ago over alleged illegal state payments of \$US30 million in legal bills to a law firm, Paraka Lawyers. His arrest was prevented by a series of legal challenges to the investigation. Last month, the Supreme Court lifted the stay orders, paving the way for the case to be pursued.

The student movement reflects heightened anti-government sentiment amid the country's devastating economic crisis, driven by the collapse in global mining and energy commodity prices. According to the *Australian Financial Review*, PNG ended 2015 "in crisis management with cash shortages and budget cuts more severe than those in Greece's austerity package."

International financial institutions are expressing growing concern. Sydney based think-tank, the Lowy Institute, cited projections by the Asian Development Outlook that PNG growth is set to fall to 4.3 percent in 2016, then 2.4 percent in 2017. "For a country that in 2015 had the fastest growth in the region, it has been a

sharp and sudden reversal of fortune,” the report noted.

Massive spending cuts have been imposed, targeting the urban and rural poor. Public servants are going without pay, power blackouts have become regular in Port Moresby and Lae, and budget reductions have been imposed in health and education. This is all taking place amid a prolonged and disastrous drought.

Protests and strikes have broken out involving important sections of the working class—power workers, miners, teachers and public servants.

In the past week, groups of students have toured the provinces to campaign over their grievances. A public forum in Goroka attracted about 4,000 people. Large rallies have been held in most provincial capitals in PNG’s Highlands region. In Simbu province, around 6,000 people attended a forum.

Police have shown little tolerance for the student-led meetings. In Wewak, 18 students were arrested on May 30 after the police commander claimed the students caused a “commotion” and unlawfully assembled in the township area.

In Wabag, more than 15,000 people had gathered when about 100 police started firing tear gas. During the ensuing melee, the Bank of South Pacific and provincial centre buildings were stoned and shops around the town attacked. Government MP Robert Ganim denounced the student protests as a “threat to national security.”

Opposition politicians are continuing to exploit the student movement, while seeking to limit its demands to the issue of “corruption.” Following the Wewak arrests, Pangu Pati leader Don Pomb Polye criticised the detentions as “uncalled for in a democratic country like PNG; it is unlawful and might lead to chaos in the country.” The provincial Governor and former Prime Minister Michael Somare negotiated for the students’ release and covered their bail.

With the ruling elite under pressure from financial institutions and ratings agencies over the dire fiscal position, no section of the bourgeoisie has any solution except more austerity. The opposition parties, and the student leaders who are closely aligned with them, are desperate to confine the movement within the parliamentary system, isolating it from the increasingly restive working class. SRC leaders have emphasised they are only seeking “respect” for the office of prime minister and for the country’s constitution.

Last week’s parliamentary session was the opposition’s fourth attempt to oust the government over the corruption allegations. Previous attempts have been struck down due to questions about the validity of the signatures on documents. The governing party has asked the courts to make a ruling on the latest motion. With elections due in 2017, no-confidence votes will soon be barred as the constitution prevents them being taken less than 12 months out from a general election.

All the opposition parties are part of the ruling elite and mired in corruption. PNG Party leader Belden Namah has postured as the principal defender of the students, while warning them against taking “the law into their own hands.” Namah is Somare’s former forestry minister and was deputy prime minister under O’Neill. Before entering politics he was an army officer and businessman, describing himself as being “into the multi-billion-dollar business of logging.” In 2009, the Samoan Central Bank announced an inquiry into money laundering offences over several properties purchased by Namah, worth more than 4 million PNG Kina.

PNG’s former colonial power, Australia, may be turning against O’Neill, who was installed in 2011 through an illegal parliamentary manoeuvre. His predecessor, Somare, was ousted with Canberra’s involvement, because he was considered too close to Beijing.

In January, however, O’Neill removed 15 senior Australian officials who were working as so-called advisors within the finance, treasury, transport and justice ministries. This was a marked setback for Australia’s neo-colonial interests.

The Lowy Institute has now criticised O’Neill, saying the corruption furore was “distracting from the desperate attention the economy needs.” With an election looming next year, it complained, the “bold action” urgently required—i.e., deepening attacks on the working class—“seems unlikely.”



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