

Widening unrest in Papua New Guinea following police shooting of student protesters

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Angry protests have spread across Papua New Guinea (PNG) following the police shooting of unarmed student protesters in the capital Port Moresby on Wednesday. Up to 38 students were injured, including one with a gunshot wound to the head. Initial reports that four students were killed were denied by Prime Minister Peter O'Neill.

O'Neill has been the focus of sustained student protests and mass boycotts of classes for the past six weeks. He is accused of allegedly authorising payments for fraudulent legal bills amounting to \$A30 million (\$US22 million). Following the occupation of the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) by heavily-armed police on May 17, the first semester was suspended and students ordered to vacate the campus.

Behind the corruption scandal is an immense social crisis caused by the collapse of the economy. PNG, which is heavily reliant on mining exports, including oil and gas, is at the sharp end of the precipitous decline in global commodity prices, mirroring the intractable problems of other so-called “petrodollar” economies.

The *Australian Financial Review* reported in April that, having been the fastest growing economy in the Pacific region the previous year, PNG ended 2015 “in crisis management with cash shortages and budget cuts more severe than those in Greece’s austerity package.” The government sought an emergency World Bank loan of \$US300 million to tackle a foreign exchange crisis, a humanitarian disaster from a severe drought and a ballooning budget deficit. The move followed a failure to raise \$US1 billion on bond markets.

Government revenues have slumped by 21 percent, prompting sweeping attacks on public services and living standards. The national health budget alone has been slashed by almost 40 percent. The student uprising

followed a series of strikes early this year by power workers, miners and public servants, amid broadening opposition to the economic turmoil.

The student leadership, however, has so far limited the protests to the issue of government corruption, while emphasising their “patriotic” intentions and orienting towards the opposition parliamentary parties—which are also mired in corruption and have no solution to the social crisis.

Wednesday’s police attack erupted as 1,000 students were leaving the UPNG’s Waigani campus to go to parliament. Student leaders intended to show support for a planned motion of no confidence in O’Neill’s People’s National Congress Party government by the parliamentary opposition.

Armed police intercepted several chartered buses before the students departed. When they decided to march and began heading towards the university’s outer gate, the police fired live rounds and tear gas directly into the protest.

Radio New Zealand reported scenes of “chaos,” with hundreds of students fleeing after the police opened fire. One student, Zacharia Yakap, said “since the police were even running into the campus looking for students, the students ran into nearby bushes where the police also followed through and shot them.” Another, Stacey Yalo, told ABC News, “It is coming to a point where they are actually targeting students as if they’re criminals. They’re shooting at them. They’re out here to shoot and kill.” Journalist Rose Amos reported being kicked and punched by two police officers after seeking cover.

Port Moresby Hospital CEO Grant Muddle said they dealt with eight gunshot casualties, including four seriously wounded. All were stabilised and admitted to the hospital. A dozen other protesters were treated for

injuries, while 10 students were taken to a hospital in Gerehu. Muddle said that police had shot tear gas into a crowd outside the emergency department entrance, hitting patients with gas.

Later, as outrage spread, police were reported to be on “high alert” in Mount Hagen, where there was an attack on the police station, and in Lae where students rallied. Several road blocks were erected on the main road through the Highlands region. The UPNG administration obtained a court order banning further protest action, but student leaders have not ruled out more mass mobilisations and class boycotts.

O’Neill denied that the police targeted the students, and claimed that their only response was the use of tear-gas and “warning shots” in reply to rock-throwing by protesters. Student leader Peter Nahi said O’Neill’s claims were “just not true.”

O’Neill has announced there will be an inquiry, but it will only investigate the “agitators” who he insists are responsible and not why police fired on unarmed protesters. The inquiry will “determine the underlying reasons for continued student unrest promoted by individuals outside the student body,” O’Neill declared. The ombudsman has announced a separate “independent” inquiry.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop called for “calm” and intoned that “the right to protest peacefully and lawfully be respected.” Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull told ABC television on Wednesday that he had spoken with O’Neill who informed him that he was “leaving the handling of the matter to the police.” O’Neill flatly rejected an offer by Turnbull of Australian “help.” “Of course Malcolm has got every right to call me any time he wants to, but as I indicated to him, these are internal matters for Papua New Guinea,” O’Neill declared.

Turnbull’s phone call indicates the grave concerns within the Australian ruling elite about the deteriorating situation in its former colony. Australia is PNG’s dominant source of trade, investment and aid. Australian companies, particularly timber and mining, have commercial interests estimated at over \$A18 billion. Canberra continues to rely on PNG to house its Manus Island refugee detention centre, despite a PNG Supreme Court ruling that it is illegal. Currently, 56 elite Australian Federal Police officers are on duty “mentoring” their local PNG counterparts.

China increasing has its own commercial interests in the country—highlighted by the massive Ramu Nickel mine. O’Neill reportedly flew out to Beijing immediately following the protests, a visit that will be closely watched in both Canberra and Washington.

PNG occupies a key geo-strategic position in the deepening confrontation with China, stemming from the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” and US-led preparations for war. Australia’s 2016 Defence White Paper emphasised that “the security, stability and cohesion of Papua New Guinea” was vital for a “secure, resilient Australia with secure northern approaches.”

Washington’s interests in PNG were bluntly spelled out to a Congressional committee in 2011 by then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton., She declared: “Let’s put aside the moral, humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in, and let’s just talk, you know, straight realpolitik. We are in a competition with China ... Exxon Mobil is producing it [a \$19 billion gas project in PNG]. China is in there every day in every way trying to figure out how it’s going to come in behind us, come in under us.”

The shootings will only intensify popular grievances against the government, and moves to oust O’Neill could well be underway. Canberra, backed by Washington, would be intimately involved in any such development. O’Neill himself came to office in 2011 through an illegal parliamentary manoeuvre backed by the Australian government to oust his predecessor Michael Somare, who was regarded as too close to Beijing.

On Thursday, the *Australian* identified three former prime ministers still in parliament—the influential former independence leader Michael Somare, Paias Wingti and Julius Chan—“who may each be prepared to step into the breach until the election,” which is due in 2017. Canberra is by no means indifferent as to who that might be.



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