

Papua New Guinea student protests continue

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Students at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) defied a court order and the university administration on Tuesday by refusing to return to classes. A group of 40 students circulated around the Waigani campus after daubing themselves with red earth in traditional “haus krai” mourning for two wounded colleagues still in hospital. The students have declared they will not return to classes until they have recovered.

Heavily-armed police opened fire on hundreds of protesting students with live ammunition and tear gas on June 8, injuring nearly 40, several critically. The students were preparing to march to the parliament to support plans by the official opposition to move a no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Peter O’Neill over corruption allegations.

The crackdown followed weeks of student protests, including widespread class boycotts, at UPNG and other tertiary institutions. The university, which has nearly 12,000 students, has been closed since police occupied the campus on May 17 to suppress the widening protest movement.

In the wake of the shootings, protests have been banned. A court order was obtained by the UPNG administration stopping the students from acting in any way “contrary to their enrolment.” Armed police remain encamped at the university’s two campuses in Port Moresby. The vice-chancellor, Professor Albert Mellam, declared last Friday that the first semester would resume this week.

Australian ABC Radio reported that while lecturers had been instructed to report for classes on Tuesday, no students turned up. Only a handful could be seen on the campus grounds. Students said they felt particularly aggrieved that there had been no explanation by the university regarding its response to the shootings or concerns expressed over student welfare.

The National Court yesterday blocked legal moves by

the Student Representative Council (SRC) to have the police removed from the university. Separate applications to stop police arresting SRC president Kenneth Rapa, who remains at large, and to declare the police shooting as unconstitutional, were also dismissed.

The protests, now into their sixth week, are calling for O’Neill to resign and face an investigation into allegations over payments worth \$US22 million to a legal firm for unauthorised invoices. Behind the longstanding corruption scandal, however, lies a worsening social crisis produced by the precipitous collapse of global commodity prices. The PNG economy has gone into sharp reverse in the last twelve months. Severe government spending cutbacks have seen public servants not being paid and massive reductions to the health and education budgets.

Outrage over the shootings has deepened over the past week and is spreading throughout the country’s student populations, including into secondary schools. Discontent and tension has become particularly acute in the Highlands region.

Clashes between groups of students erupted at the University of Technology in Lae (Unitech) on Monday and the University of Goroka in the Eastern Highlands on Tuesday. At the Lae campus a fight broke out following a forum hosted jointly by the Unitech administration and SRC in an attempt to end the boycott of classes. While acknowledging that “the dynamic has changed so much” following the shootings, Vice Chancellor Albert Schram appealed to students to return to class to salvage the academic year.

The National reported that students determined to maintain the boycott were angered when Unitech SRC president David Kelma revealed the SRC had signed an agreement committing students to an immediate return to class. Kelma urged students to “respect” the leaders they had “voted into office.” “As university students

we must behave as elites and intellectuals,” he said. “We must behave properly and paint a good picture of ourselves to the public and potential future employers who want to employ us.” Everything done at Unitech, Kelma added “must be done for the good of the nation.”

Police were called into the Goroka campus on Tuesday, ostensibly to control a group of more than 50 students who were fighting over whether to continue their boycott. Radio New Zealand reported a “scene of chaos” when simmering tensions boiled over. The local hospital took in dozens of injured students after fighting moved into the town. Police used tear gas to control skirmishes while shops, offices and schools were closed.

The University of Goroka suspended classes for two weeks and the provincial government evacuated students to their respective home provinces. According to the *Post Courier*, at least one police squad was mobilised to “escort” students home.

The SRC leaderships continue to tie the movement to the parliamentary opposition, which is working to confine the issue to the O’Neill government’s alleged corruption. Opposition parties have made four attempts to present motions of no-confidence, all of which have been thrown out for procedural reasons. They are now seeking to recall parliament, which is in recess until August, before a constitutional provision which bars no confidence motions within 12 months of a general election, takes effect.

Despite vague calls for a more equitable distribution of the country’s wealth, student leaders have not put forward any program to address the catastrophic social crisis. By making corruption the central issue, they are collaborating with the opposition parties, which are committed to imposing the burden of the worsening economic crisis onto the backs of workers and the rural poor.

Pressure is building on student leaders to wind up the protests. Governmental Chief Secretary Isaac Lupari met with the vice-chancellors of the four state universities on Wednesday “to sort out student issues once and for all.” He indicated penalties would be imposed on students who continued to defy instructions from their respective university councils.

The *Post Courier* declared that students should now “consider their options and not jeopardise their

studies.” Returning to classes, it suggested, should be accompanied by “awareness campaigns” targeting voters in the lead-up to the 2017 general election. This could be “a win-win for everyone including the institutions,” the paper argued.

O’Neill appears, for the moment, to have the backing of the Australian government which helped install him in 2011 in an effort to counteract growing Chinese influence. With PNG a vital strategic asset in the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia, Canberra and Washington will be deeply concerned at the ongoing political instability. Australia has previously indicated that it would intervene, including militarily, in the event of a crisis.

In a conveniently timed show of force, a US naval vessel is to visit Port Moresby June 17-24 on a bilateral military exchange between the US Marine Corps and the PNG Defence Force. The USNS *Sacagawea* and its troop contingent will conduct “security cooperation” and “interoperability” exercises with several Pacific countries including PNG, Timor Leste, Tonga, and Fiji.



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