

PNG government inquiry to witch-hunt students for campus unrest

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In the wake of a protracted student protest, the Papua New Guinea government has moved to suppress opposition among students. It has imposed curfews on two university campuses, threatened to call out the military and set up a Commission of Inquiry, purportedly to investigate recent violence at three campuses.

The government's National Security Advisory Council (NSAC) recommended to the cabinet on Tuesday that night-time curfews be enforced at both the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) in Port Moresby and the University of Technology (Unitech) in Lae to help police "restore order" at the campuses. Chief Secretary Isaac Lupari said soldiers would be called in to support police if the need arose.

The NSAC denounced recent incidents at Unitech as "barbarity by mindless individuals." Lupari declared: "The perpetrators of this violence have no respect for the lives of others or the rule of law. They will be brought to justice."

This response is a warning of the punitive and witch-hunting agenda behind the government's inquiry. It was announced following the killing of an engineering student at Unitech by attackers last weekend, the burning of buildings and cars at UPNG and clashes at the University of Goroka. These events were triggered after police opened fire on peacefully protesting students at UPNG on June 8, wounding nearly 40 people.

Prime Minister Peter O'Neill said the inquiry was essential in "helping to better understand what transpired in recent weeks, as well as preventing a repeat in the future." He claimed: "We all need answers, right around the country, to understand the factors leading to the escalation of student protests and the acts of violence that we have seen in recent weeks."

In fact, the terms of reference make clear that the inquiry will be used to absolve the government of responsibility and place full blame on the students. The commission will examine whether there was "outside influence" and students "were incited to encourage unrest at the universities." Headed by a retired judge, Justice Warwick Andrew, it will look into the roles of the Student Representative Councils (SRCs), the university managements and the police.

Confronted by a severe economic and social crisis, O'Neill's government has been determined to intimidate and suppress any opposition to its continued rule and policies. Driven by a precipitous economic collapse, because of the global mining export price crash, the government is implementing harsh austerity measures, including funding reductions of 40 percent across the health system.

In the face of escalating state violence, students across PNG have waged a determined struggle for nearly two months. Although channeled behind parliamentary opposition accusations of government corruption, their protests have expressed popular opposition to the austerity measures, which are aimed against the working class, youth and the rural poor.

Violent outbreaks that erupted last week between student groups revealed frustrations arising from the political dead-end being imposed by the SRC leaderships. Some students remain determined to maintain class boycotts, while others have reportedly been preparing to return to class. The divisions have exacerbated tensions between tribally-based factions that have lined up on opposing sides.

Throughout the protests, the SRCs aligned themselves with the parliamentary opposition and made limited appeals for O'Neill's ouster over fraud allegations. With O'Neill still entrenched in office, and

the ruling elite intensifying its pressure to stamp out the protests, the SRCs collaborated with the university administrations to organise a return to classes.

At UPNG, the SRC invoked a traditional Melanesian “reconciliation” process, led by church leaders, in an attempt to salvage the academic year. The “reconciliation” was cancelled after students clashed with campus security officers trying to enforce the return to class last week. Four security vehicles and a UPNG building were torched.

Amid growing tensions, a first-year student was killed at Lae’s Unitech and buildings burned last Saturday in what authorities claimed was a “targeted attack.” Witnesses said a “mob” armed with bush knives entered the campus and killed Graham Romanong as he slept in his campus dormitory. Three students have been arrested and are being questioned by police.

Many aspects of the incident remain unexplained. The attack took place despite the presence of large numbers of security personnel and police, ostensibly on the campus to maintain order and stop anyone from “stirring up trouble” as students returned to class. The offenders also managed to evade the police and escape. Lae police commander Anthony Wagambie said when the police arrived on the scene they were “outnumbered” and had to use teargas to disperse “the crowd” in the dark.

The SRC had earlier signed an agreement committing students to an immediate resumption of classes, prompting outrage from those determined to continue the boycott. The killing, followed by the destruction of several buildings, has now forced Unitech to evacuate students and close the campus for three weeks.

Radio New Zealand reported on Thursday that UPNG remains in “disarray.” A student leader, Henry Norrie-Maim, said the student body has been scattered by the police occupation of their campuses. According to Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio, hundreds of students have been heading back to their provinces or sought shelter off campus, fearing for their safety.

The political establishment is concerned that the student protest movement will coalesce with struggles by workers over jobs, living standards and social conditions. A concerted campaign is under way to undercut public sympathy for the students, who are accused of being stirred up by outside “agitators.”

explained the WSWS students fundamentally different political strategy to that pursued by the SRC leaderships. None of the immense social problems can be resolved simply by replacing O’Neill with another ruling class representative. The social and democratic rights of young people and working people can be secured only by turning to a socialist and internationalist perspective, together with students and workers across the region and globally.



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