

Archives Australia suppresses documents detailing Papua New Guinea intervention

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According to a report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) on January 1, documents detailing Australia's relationship with its former colonial possession, Papua New Guinea (PNG), which date back two decades, are to remain secret.

The Sandline affair, which brought down the PNG government of Julius Chan after the Pacific nation hired mercenaries to combat armed rebels during the 1990s civil war in Bougainville was, the SMH said, a "defining moment" in PNG's history and its relationship with Canberra.

Negotiations undertaken in the wake of the 1997–8 events saw the signing of the 2001 Bougainville Peace Agreement. This ended the long-running war and resulted in last month's referendum in which 97.7 percent of Bougainville's voters chose to break away from PNG.

The National Archives of Australia (NAA) usually releases previously secret cabinet documents 20 years after they were created. The NAA's director, David Fricker, said the practice was the "essential function we perform for transparency and integrity of Australian government in this democracy of ours."

However, while the NAA last month released, among other documents, two cabinet papers about PNG-related events from 1998–99, several others, including Australian Defence Force Contingency Planning for PNG, a Review of Australia's Policy Towards Papua New Guinea, and PNG Economy-Australian response, remain under wraps.

Legislation allows the NAA to keep information secret if it is considered politically necessary. An NAA spokesman said: "If this information [about PNG] was disclosed, it could lessen the confidence of a foreign government in the Australian government, which could damage the international relations between the

countries."

Intelligence and security agencies, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Department of Defence were all consulted on the decision, according to the spokesman. The government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison was doubtless involved.

Fricker is a former deputy head of the country's domestic spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). Marking the unsealing of the cabinet papers, Fricker hypocritically boasted, "in this present conversation we're having around Australia about secrecy, and about openness of information, about transparency and integrity of government, [releasing the documents] is the function of the National Archives."

In fact, successive governments have established what amounts to the framework for a police state by eviscerating basic democratic rights, including the right of the public to know about military-intelligence operations. Measures include the criminalisation of journalists and secret trials for persons who release "national security information."

Central to this authoritarian operation is the Australian government's collaboration with Washington's persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, for exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, CIA surveillance and other corrupt and illegal acts.

The Sandline affair erupted in 1997 during the decade-long struggle for Bougainville independence, which claimed some 15,000 lives. The rebellion, led by the self-styled Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), centred on the huge Panguna gold and copper mine, operated by one of the world's largest mining companies, the Anglo-Australian Rio Tinto. Following PNG's formal independence from Australia in 1975,

the mine provided 45 percent of the country's export income.

Panguna provoked protests and resentments on Bougainville, generating widespread opposition to the mine and the Australian-led colonial administration. In 1988, landowners began sabotaging its operations, demanding higher royalty payments. The PNG military, armed and assisted by Australia, attempted to crush the BRA.

The BRA's suppression was regarded as critical, not just for the future of Rio Tinto's project but also the security of mining interests throughout PNG. Australian companies were at the forefront of plundering the country's natural resources through huge and highly profitable mines. Some 2,000 Australian military personnel and 260 civilian officials served in the Bougainville intervention, the largest since the Vietnam War.

After it became obvious that the PNG military could not defeat the BRA, Canberra changed tack to impose a negotiated settlement. In 1997, the PNG government headed by Julius Chan hired the British mercenary outfit, Sandline International, in a desperate bid to put down the separatist movement.

The *Melbourne Age* reported in March 1997, "There was to be no singling out rebel leaders for assassination. Men, women and children were to be killed because they were in rebel-controlled areas and because in Port Moresby the Prime Minister, Sir Julius Chan, wanted to be able to boast when elections fall due in June that he had won the nasty war that Bougainville has been for a decade."

The Sandline operation was not opposed by Canberra on "humanitarian" grounds, but because it threatened to allow other business interests to re-open the Panguna mine at the expense of Australian-owned companies. The John Howard-led government leaked the secret plans, provoking large protests in Port Moresby and a virtual rebellion in the PNG armed forces, compelling Chan to stand down.

PNG's defence commander Jerry Singirok, who was sacked by Chan and played the pivotal role for Canberra in his ouster, indicated plans were underway for an Australian military intervention. He told the PNG *Post Courier*: "Such scenarios, although hypothetical and remote, are being seriously considered and entertained in the circles in Canberra."

According to the recent SMH report, troops were being readied to bring Australians living in PNG home if violence escalated. A Northern Territory air force base later became the holding location for helicopter gunships and weapons Sandline had planned to take into PNG.

The two PNG documents released by the NAA revealed that Canberra agreed to accept the weapons and helicopters, but then demanded Sandline pay half the cost of destroying the ordnance before it "poses a serious safety threat." Sandline, the briefing note said, was seeking a buyer for the helicopters, reportedly valued at \$A14 million.

Cabinet's National Security Committee agreed to consider the implications of British inquiries into Sandline's activities and the likelihood of Sandline succeeding in legal action against Australia for interfering in its contract with PNG. Sandline, however, subsequently went out of business.

The suppressed documents doubtless contain even more damning evidence of Canberra's dirty tricks and destabilisation activities in its former colony. The secrecy underscores the filthy role played by Australian imperialism across the region. In the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, Australia's intervention in PNG paved the way for political-military interventions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

This is not simply of historical interest. The Australian ruling elite considers PNG to be on the front line of its deepening confrontation with Beijing. As the US prepares for war against China, its local imperialist allies Australia and New Zealand are seeking to extend their own domination across the Pacific. All methods—diplomatic, economic and military—will be used in this endeavour.



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