

# New Zealand troops join imperialist intervention in the Solomon Islands

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5 December 2021

New Zealand's Labour-Green Party government has ordered police and troops to join an Australian led intervention in the crisis-hit Solomon Islands following deadly anti-government riots.

New Zealand Prime Minister Ardern said the deployment followed a request from the Solomons government, which was almost toppled during three days of rioting on November 24–26 that claimed three lives and left much of the Chinatown area of Honiara, the capital, in ruins.

An initial New Zealand military contingent of 15 personnel flew out on Thursday and another 50 joined them over the weekend. They are reinforcing a 200-strong multilateral force on the ground in Honiara from Australia, Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG). Australia and PNG indicated that their forces are expected to be in Solomon Islands for at least a month, but this is likely to be extended.

The Solomons events were not spontaneous, but a pre-planned operation by US-supported opposition forces aimed at removing the government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and reversing its diplomatic recognition of China. Opposition leader Matthew Wale has announced that he will file a notice of no confidence in Sogavare in the parliament today.

Australia's Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, declared that Canberra's 100-plus strong deployment was to work with the local police force to maintain the security of the "Pacific family," and would play no role in the country's internal political disputes. The troops' arrival ended the immediate rioting.

However, the escalating international intervention involving the regional imperialist powers Australia and New Zealand, backed by the US, indicates that the crisis is being used to boost their position in the region amid the growing confrontation with China.

A joint Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police group met virtually last week, including police brass from Fiji, Nauru, Niue, PNG, Samoa, New Zealand and Australia. The group declared they "stood ready to assist" their Solomon Islands counterparts. Australia's Police Commissioner Reece Kershaw stressed that law enforcement often needed to "traverse politics" in order to "keep communities safe."

Ardern declared New Zealand troops and police are well equipped to deal with "dangerous situations." "Every deployment brings its risks and challenges but our people have vast experience in the Pacific region and are amongst some of the most highly skilled when it comes to de-escalating conflict," she said.

Foreign Affairs Minister Nanaia Mahuta also claimed New Zealand's role was about maintaining "peace and security." "We will do that as a third-party state in relation to the activities we undertake. It's not for New Zealand to get involved in the domestic politics of another country," Mahuta told Radio NZ, adding that she expected further rioting.

Wellington and Canberra are not concerned with the well-being of the impoverished Pacific peoples, but with undermining China's diplomatic and economic ties in the region. Mahuta used a major speech on the Pacific last month to back Washington's diplomatic offensive against China's funding and influence in the region.

The Labour-led government's decision to wait for a formal request was criticised in *Stuff* for delaying the deployment for several days behind those of its "partners." Robert Ayson, Professor of Strategic Studies at Victoria University, said he could accept that New Zealand might be "slow" to respond to issues further afield, such as in the South China Sea, but the country "needs to take a leadership role in the Pacific."

Anna Powles from the Centre for Defence and Security at Massey University said that going into the Solomon Islands, which is part of Melanesia, was an opportunity to demonstrate a “commitment” to the whole Pacific, not just Polynesia. “Australia needs to know that it can rely on New Zealand to step up in the region as well,” she said.

New Zealand has been preparing to intervene militarily in the Pacific for some time. The Defence Force’s biggest regular exercise, codenamed Southern Katipo, has been an explicit rehearsal for an armed incursion into a South Pacific country to quell civil unrest. The biennial war games have trained NZ troops to lead a 2,000 strong multinational force, including from Australia and the US, tasked with restoring “order.”

The precedent for the current deployment was the 2003-17 Australian-led neo-colonial RAMSI (Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands) intervention. The Australian government spent nearly \$3 billion on its takeover of the country of 700,000 people, including a provocative attempt to remove Sogavare as prime minister. Over 2,000 New Zealanders were involved in RAMSI over its 14-year duration, including some 1,000 Defence Force personnel, 800 police and other government officials and volunteers.

RAMSI left the Solomon Islands wracked by an economic and social crisis. It is currently listed in the UN’s Least Developed Country category. According to the World Bank, the average income, just \$US2,500 per person, has yet to recover to its level before the intervention. A tiny elite layer has meanwhile been enriched, leaving much of the working class and rural poor without access to electricity, running water and education.

While very few cases of COVID-19 have entered the country due to tight border controls, the economy has been hit hard. It was already forecast to grow just 0.4 percent in this year. The price of the main export, logs, fell last year and tourism shut down. The government put public servants on half pay and made woefully inadequate support payments to workers, thus intensifying social tensions.

The latest moves to repeat Sogavare’s attempted ouster are the outcome of two years of US-fuelled provocations against the government after the country switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China

in 2019.

Sogavare told *ABC News* last week the fresh unrest was “influenced and encouraged by other powers... countries that don’t want ties with the People’s Republic of China.” Opposition is led by Daniel Suidani, provincial governor of the biggest island, Malaita, who maintains independent ties with Taiwan and has blocked Chinese investment. Suidani’s supporters last year demanded that all people of Chinese background leave the province within 24 hours.

The Sogavare government has stated that the instigators have “another evil plan” to decimate Honiara. It warns that they are planning a next phase of unrest, including the declaration of Malaita province as an independent state.

Behind the scenes, Australian officials, doubtless with NZ and US backing, are likely to be undermining the Sogavare government and encouraging defections to the anti-Chinese opposition.



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