

Solomon Islands dragooned into the "coalition of the willing"

By Frank Gaglioti
2 April 2003

The absurdity of the Bush administration's claims about the international support for its invasion of Iraq—the so-called “coalition of the willing”—is highlighted by the case of the Solomon Islands.

The list of some 46 countries, which is posted on the White House web site, has been the subject of lavish assertions by senior US officials. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice described the coalition as “strong, broad and diverse”. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld boasted that it “is larger than the coalition that existed during the Gulf War in 1991”.

Only two of the countries listed—Britain and Australia—have provided any significant combat support. Many on the list have been bullied and bribed into publicly backing the war. When it came to the Solomon Islands, however, it appears that the government was not even asked whether it wanted to join the list.

Reacting to press reports about the “coalition of the willing”, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza declared on March 25: “The government is completely unaware of such statements being made, and therefore wishes to disassociate itself from the report.” There was no public response from the Bush administration and the list remained unchanged.

Washington was aware that the Solomons was in no position to object. It is a small group of islands in the South Pacific located between Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu with a population of under half a million and a GDP of just \$US800 million. Moreover, after several years of warring between rival island groups, the country is teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, with its civil administration and services in a state of collapse.

Opposition spokesman Alfred Sasako responded to Kemakeza's remarks with alarm. “At a time when we do not have any resources whatsoever, I do not think

that any public stands that would be seen as being negative to a main ally like the United States would be something that I would encourage,” he declared.

Behind the scenes, a bit of diplomatic muscle was brought to bear. On March 28, Radio New Zealand International reported that the Solomons' government had changed its mind. US ambassador to the region Susan Jacobs told the radio station: “I've been in discussions with the prime minister, and foreign minister, who have told me that they will be retracting their disavowal of support, and reinforcing their support of the Coalition.”

In a final twist to the story, the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Commission reported that in the week prior to his disavowal Kemakeza had written to Bush offering support for the war. Had the prime minister intended his government's original support to be a purely private matter? Was the subsequent repudiation a ploy to extract a higher price? Or was the latest story a pure invention to enable the government to avoid Washington's displeasure? No explanation has been offered.

What is clear is that the original support, if it existed at all, was tentative at best and that Washington was not going to brook any opposition. One can only guess at the strongarm tactics employed, perhaps with the assistance of Canberra, which has been discussing the necessity of Australia intervening more directly into so-called “failed states” like the Solomons in the South Pacific.

The White House no doubt regards the affair as an insignificant diplomatic hiccup. But it underscores the hollowness of the Bush administration's claims to have broad support for the war on Iraq. And one is left wondering about the untold stories behind some of the other names on the list—Palau, the Marshall Islands,

Tonga and Micronesia—as well as a string of economically desperate countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

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