

New evidence points to Australia's predatory motives in the Solomons

By Rick Kelly
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Further evidence has emerged highlighting the fact that Australia's current military intervention in the Solomon Islands has nothing to do with helping the people of the small island nation but is instead aimed at consolidating its domination in the South West Pacific. A *Dateline* program on August 27 broadcast on Australia's SBS TV, revealed that the Howard government's decision to dispatch troops to the Solomons may have been prompted by concern that Indonesia was on the verge of doing the same.

Citing "a highly-placed source," *Dateline* reported that "intense negotiations were taking place in May this year between the Indonesian government and the Solomon Islands government for an Indonesian intervention in the islands. The negotiations with the Indonesians were considerably advanced before Australia discovered them and made an immediate and very firm counteroffer. Throughout May, Solomon Islands representatives were dealing with Indonesia in Bali, Honiara, and through their respective embassies in Canberra."

The program interviewed the Solomon Islands High Commissioner Milner Tozaka, who admitted to being involved in talks with his Indonesian counterpart in Canberra. "There maybe [were] some discussions but there is not any formal sort of request made to Indonesian government for an assistance [sic]," Tozaka told *Dateline*. "I didn't receive any notification in writing at all for troops from Indonesia to go down to the Solomons [...] Maybe there were discussions. As colleagues [we] were talking about the problems in the Solomon Islands."

Based on its source, however, *Dateline* indicated that more definite arrangements were being made. At a regional ministerial meeting in late April organised by Australia and Indonesia, Solomon Islands Foreign

Minister Laurie Chan "led the discussions for an Indonesian intervention, apparently with the full authority of his Prime Minister, Sir Alan Kemakeza."

At this gathering, Chan delivered a letter from Kemakeza to the Indonesian government asking it to intervene in the Solomon Islands. In May, a series of high-level meetings were then held in Honiara and the Indonesian embassy in Canberra. Tozaka admitted that these meetings took place with Indonesia's acting ambassador Imron Kotan, but maintains that they related solely to "educational and cultural activities".

Comments by Foreign Minister Chan reported by the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation confirm that extensive discussions had taken place with Jakarta. Answering a question in parliament on July 14, Chan stated that "an agreement on mutual technical cooperation was worked out in terms of marine, forestry, agriculture, journalism and cultural exchange".

Dateline also interviewed Solomon Islands opposition spokesman Alfred Sasako, who corroborated the existence of a letter from Kemakeza to Jakarta requesting assistance. "What form that sort of assistance takes, I cannot tell, but there certainly was contact and discussions and negotiations between our government and the Indonesian government," he said.

Sasako also pointed to Indonesia's possible motivations. "Having lost East Timor, [Indonesia] is now trying to build an alliance with member countries of the Pacific who have not made a decision in relation to West Papua, so I believe it was part of an effort by Indonesia to muscle support for its cause that it does not want to lose as it did of East Timor, West Papua to independence," he said.

The exact nature of the negotiations, in particular whether they included troops, remains unclear but it is

certainly possible that the Solomons turned to Jakarta for financial and other assistance. The Kemakeza government was virtually bankrupt and was being bullied by the Howard government, which had turned down requests for further aid. Confronted with deepening social problems, Kemakeza may have sought money and possibly troops to shore up his shaky regime.

While plans for an Indonesian intervention may have acted as a catalyst for the Australian government's decision to send troops, it is certainly not the case, as *Dateline* suggested, that the intervention was solely a reactive and defensive measure. The Howard government's intervention in the Solomon Islands represented a major shift in Australian foreign policy that followed an extended debate within ruling circles.

A key aim of Australia's participation in the US-led invasion of Iraq earlier in the year was to legitimise and gain US support for its own imperialist ambitions in the Pacific region. The Howard government seized upon the Bush administration's doctrine of "pre-emptive strike" to justify its new, more aggressive and interventionist approach towards its Pacific island neighbours.

Prior to the dispatching of troops to the Solomons, Howard declared that Australia could not tolerate the dangers of a "failed state" in its region. Despite a complete lack of evidence, the prime minister made a series of warnings about the possibility of international terrorist groups and criminal syndicates using the Solomon Islands as a base of operations.

It is quite possible, however, that the discovery of a deal between Indonesia and the Solomon Islands acted to accelerate planning that was already underway. Certainly, the whole exercise unfolded with extraordinary rapidity—from the release of a blueprint entitled *Our Failing Neighbour* by the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) on June 10 to the dispatch of troops just over a month later on July 24.

The *Dateline* story has been all but ignored in the Australian media, which has uniformly promoted the Howard government's claim that the Solomons intervention—"Operation Helpem Fren" (Help a Friend)—is a humanitarian operation aimed at ending ethnic violence and establishing law and order. The possibility that Canberra may have acted to preempt

Jakarta points to grubbier motives.

As the ASPI report bluntly explained, ethnic fighting and political instability had damaged Australia's small but significant economic interests in the Solomons. It also outlined Australia's longstanding strategic interests in preserving the South West Pacific as its sphere of influence.

"The fact that the Solomon Islands government is bankrupt means that it is vulnerable to external influence—both state and non-state actors... Any power that wanted to operate forces in Solomon Islands might find it easy to secure ready acquiescence at a low price. If Australia is not robustly engaged in [the] Solomon Islands, others may fill the space."

The "others" were left unspecified. But as the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, Australia pointedly ignored an offer by rival France to supply troops for the multinational force in the Solomons. In the past, Canberra has raised concerns about the intrusion of business interests, from Asia in particular, into the small Pacific Island states that it has traditionally regarded as its preserve.

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