

Solomon Island prisoners accuse Australian authorities of abuses

By Will Marshall
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Inmates at the Rove Prison in the Solomon Islands have blamed Australian officials for a major disturbance that erupted in mid-October. For three nights, 200 prisoners refused to return to their cells, insisting that the police minister accept a petition. The standoff ended on October 14 after prison guards and Australian-led Regional Assistance to the Solomon Island (RAMSI) officers used tear gas to quell the unrest.

According to several media reports, which sought to trivialise the events, the inmates were angered by the fact that the minister responsible for prisons, Augustine Taneko, refused them access to television as well as any privacy with their wives.

However, several prisoners have been able to communicate their version of events to the *World Socialist Web Site*. They say the Australian officials in charge of the jail have engaged in “cruel” and “inhumane” practices in an effort to intimidate inmates, some of whom are still awaiting trial.

Under an Australian government “aid” package, the Solomons’ prisons are managed by GRM International, owned by Australia’s richest individual, media magnate Kerry Packer. More than 700 people have been arrested—with about 300 held in Rove—since July 2003 when Canberra dispatched 2,000 police and soldiers to the Solomons and took over key economic and administrative posts to help secure its strategic interests in the Pacific region.

Prisoners resorted to open defiance of the prison management after it refused to send the inmates’ submission to the country’s High Court complaining about maltreatment and poor conditions. A prisoner wrote: “We are calling for an independent investigation, for a human rights group to come and investigate and inspect the treatment of inmates at

Rove Central Prison at the Solomon Islands”.

This plea is the result of longstanding complaints. As early as 2003, prisoners and lawyers claimed that RAMSI was involved in the maltreatment of prisoners. This was substantiated in August 2004 when a riot broke out over the lack of rights and poor food. Detainees were heard shouting slogans calling for RAMSI’s withdrawal from the country. The High Court ruled that conditions at the prison were “unlawful” and “unreasonable” (See: Solomon Islands: prison protest over lack of rights under Australian intervention).

Since last month’s events, the authorities have singled out nine members of the prisoners’ representation committees as the instigators of the previous riot. The inmates have been placed in a segregation unit that the Red Cross has deemed too small for human habitation. The Red Cross previously called for the demolition of the building, which lacks ventilation.

In an attempt to justify the actions of the authorities, Barry Apsey, the Australian-appointed Commissioner of Prisons, wrote to the *Solomon Star* on October 26, congratulating the prison staff on their handling of the incident. Apsey stated: “Immediately after Friday evening’s incident, those inmates involved were locked down for 24-hours. Restrictions will be progressively eased as is standard practice”.

Apsey’s claim of a lockdown lasting only one day, followed by “easing”, is a gross deception. According to the letters received by the WSWs, on November 18—more than a month after the latest disturbance—prisoners in blocks 1 and 2 were still being locked up for 22 hours a day. Prisoners have been told that the lockup will be reduced by just one hour per month, subject to “good behaviour”.

Earlier, on October 25, one inmate wrote: “Since last Friday we prisoners in Rove are still locked up for 23 hours a day and our mosquito nets are still not returned. We Solomon Island prisoners want the outside world to know that the GRM project is encouraging cruelty in our happy isles the Solomon Islands”.

The writer expressed outrage at the treatment of inmates in the long-term block and the female block, who were not involved in the incident. Moreover, one of the females was on remand, not having been convicted of anything. These prisoners have also had their mosquito nets confiscated on the grounds that they were making sling shots from the material.

Rove authorities have claimed that the jail was sprayed to deter malarial mosquitoes. Mosquito nets, however, are the most effective means of preventing infected mosquitoes from transmitting malaria. According to Canberra’s own official aid agency, AusAID, the Solomon Islands has one of the highest malaria rates in the world. Prisoners have reported that by November 18, about 10 inmates had contracted malaria.

If the authorities were genuinely concerned about nets being turned into sling shots, the obvious question is why the nets could not be checked on a regular basis for tampering. It seems that by increasing the likelihood of contracting malaria, the jail management is attempting to intimidate the prisoners into submission.

Among the other complaints voiced by the prisoners at Rove is that the normal supply of water was stopped. Now prisoners have to drink from the taps within their cells, which were meant for toilet facilities only. Prisoners say this is leading to dysentery as well as infected throats.

At various times, inmates have also had their guitars and bibles confiscated. Two warders who were trying to treat the inmates humanely were removed from the jail and replaced with less sympathetic guards. By these means, prisoners allege, “the adviser management is trying to break our spirits”.

Lawyers acting for the inmates say their treatment amounts to a form of torture contravening the UN Convention Against Torture Article 1:

“For the purposes of this Convention, torture means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person

... punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed ... when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity”.

It appears that RAMSI is also flouting the High Court’s 2004 ruling. Chief Justice Albert Palmer said the relevant prison regulations set limits on the punishment that could be inflicted by the authorities. Confinement in a separate cell could be imposed for no more than 14 days.

The regime inside the Rove Prison is one expression of the entire neo-colonial exercise being carried out by the Howard government. Australian corporate and strategic interests in the Solomons and the wider Asia-Pacific region have nothing to do with the welfare and well-being of the population. The only answers that RAMSI offers to unemployment and poverty are more police and repression, along with bigger jails.

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