



RESEARCH NOTE

 Number 27, 2000–01
ISSN 1328-8016

Crisis in Papua New Guinea: Military Mutiny and the Threat to Civilian Democratic Rule

Recent unrest in the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) is disturbing news for Australia not just because Australia is the former colonial power, but because PNG's geographical location makes its security an important issue in Canberra. As the recent defence White Paper, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*, observed:

We share the Morauta government's assessment that a key aspect of defence reform will be restructuring the PNGDF so that it can perform effectively within the necessarily limited resources available to it. Recent events elsewhere in the South Pacific have underlined the importance of a PNGDF that is loyal and responsive to political control.¹

This objective now seems far from realisation.

Background

The PNGDF began life under colonial rule as the Pacific Islands Regiment. Following independence in 1975, a unified PNGDF (including land, maritime and air components) was set up, but has suffered from underfunding and neglect—a potential cause of future resentment.

Since independence the PNGDF has been an Australian defence aid recipient. In 2000–2001, for instance, Australia has budgeted \$18.8 million on direct military assistance to PNG through the Defence Cooperation Program.² Australia has also occasionally written off PNGDF debts for the supply of stores and equipment, or even paid suppliers owed by the PNGDF.³

When the separatist insurgency on Bougainville broke out in 1989, it became clear that the force was ill-equipped (in all senses of the word) to deal with the stresses imposed by counter-insurgency (COIN) operations. But COIN is a very demanding activity—as the Cold

War superpowers learned in Vietnam and Afghanistan. That the PNGDF could not defeat an insurgency, even with logistic support from Australia, is therefore not particularly surprising.

Some stresses evinced by the Bougainville campaign were nevertheless particularly disturbing. There were signs of insubordination and indiscipline in the field, with credible (though never strictly proven) allegations of actions outside the accepted usages of warfare. Equally serious were indications that important elements of the PNGDF officer corps were becoming disaffected, with some senior officers openly disobeying Government orders.⁴

The Sandline Affair

It was the Bougainville insurgency which first brought serious military instability to PNG. In 1997 the Chan Government engaged a firm of 'security consultants', Sandline International, to train PNGDF members in COIN and even, according to some reports, to fight the insurgents as *de facto* mercenaries.⁵ This development was significant in two ways.

First, it was a clear vote of no-confidence by the then PNG Government in the PNGDF. It revealed that the Government believed the PNGDF incapable of resolving the Bougainville insurgency and that, if a military solution was to be found, external support was required. This judgement was in all probability accurate.

Second, and of more significance, it provoked a near-mutiny by senior PNGDF figures against the Government. There was a breakdown of civilian control over the military, and for several days the country seemed close to a collapse of civilian government and the possible institution of military rule.

The *contretemps* was resolved only when the Government cancelled the Sandline deal. The Chan Government did not survive the affair, being succeeded in July 1997 by the Skate Government, which was replaced by that of Sir Mekere Morauta in 1999.

After Sandline it became clear to PNG and its major aid donors, including Australia, that substantial reform of the military was required to restore discipline, re-establish civilian control and again make the PNGDF a force appropriate to PNG's circumstances.

Efforts at Reform

However, to identify a need for reform is one thing, to carry through needed changes is another entirely. This disjunction has been made painfully clear in PNG.

In November 2000 Prime Minister Morauta approached the British Commonwealth for assistance with a review of PNG's defence and security needs. The Commonwealth set up an Eminent Persons Group (EPG) chaired by Gerald Hensley of New Zealand (former Secretary, NZ Defence Department), together with Major General (ret) Philip Jeffrey of Australia, Mr Hugh Small QC of Jamaica and Mr Charles Lepani, a noted PNG economist and former senior public servant.⁶

Though the full EPG report has not been released, it reportedly proposed as a central measure a substantial reduction—perhaps as much as fifty per cent—in PNGDF numbers.⁷ To be sure, the reduction did not involve throwing soldiers out of barracks onto the streets: one of the EPG members has stated publicly that the proposed downsizing was 'to be achieved only through voluntary redundancy via an attractive release scheme'⁸ and pointed out that before preparing its report the EPG visited every PNGDF unit, with the

exception of those on Bougainville, to solicit input.

Nevertheless, when the EPG proposals became known in PNG, there was a strongly negative reaction from the PNGDF.

The March 2001 mutiny

On 16 March troops at Murray Barracks in Port Moresby seized weapons from the armoury there and demanded a halt to the EPG reforms. Over the next few days troops at other locations also seized weapons and made the same demand. Despite claims that the weapons would soon be handed back, the troops retained them. By 19 March Prime Minister Morauta had announced that the EPG report would not be implemented, thus conceding the mutineers' principal demand.

This concession did not, however, end the crisis, because the troops were now demanding a face-to-face meeting with the Prime Minister to obtain his personal assurances that the EPG reforms were dead and that there would be an amnesty for all involved in the mutiny. Initially Sir Mekere refused to meet the troops, but under pressure of a 72 hour ultimatum eventually agreed to see a delegation.

This delegation demanded not only confirmation of the withdrawal of the EPG reforms and of an amnesty, but also the withdrawal of all 'international advisors' complicit (in the troops' view) in developing the initial reform package. This, apparently, included the expulsion of 'unnecessary' Australian and New Zealand military advisers and economic advisers from Australia, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.⁹

The Government accepted the mutineers' demands, with the sole qualification that the precise nature of expulsions of 'unnecessary' advisors is to be determined later. The mutineers surrendered their weapons on Tuesday 27 March, one—Corporal Ben Wafia—being quoted as saying that the soldiers had decided to hand back their weapons before Cabinet met 'because we don't want to be seen demanding an amnesty under the barrel of a gun. We want democracy to work.'¹⁰

Comment: Global Anti-Globalisation

The mutiny over the EPG proposals clearly has in it some elements of the anti-globalisation trend which is, ironically enough, itself becoming a global phenomenon. It is reflected in different ways in different states: in PNG, it has taken the form of a mutiny by soldiers no doubt fearing for their jobs and blaming the EPG proposals on their concept of 'globalisation', influenced by PNG's recent heavy dependence on the World Bank.

From an external viewpoint the salient fact, however, is that—Corporal Wafia's words notwithstanding—the PNG the Government has capitulated to a military mutiny, abandoning reforms which, rightly or wrongly, it considered necessary. It is particularly disturbing that this is the second time in four years—Sandline being the first—in which a PNG Government has had to drop proposals due to illegal actions by the armed forces. The Chan Government's decision to hire Sandline was widely questioned (including by Australia), but the fact remains that it was reversed not by due political process but through

extra-legal action by senior military figures.

Abandonment under duress of the EPG reforms leaves PNG's status as an effective democracy open to question. The military remains over-staffed, under-equipped, poorly resourced and above all seriously indisciplined. This cannot change without significant reform, which now seems improbable.

The recent mutiny is the second occasion on which the PNGDF has illegally coerced government into taking actions desired by the former. Each time the perpetrators have remained apparently unscathed. An obvious conclusion to draw is that, in PNG, the military can now overturn major government decisions which it dislikes. This bodes ill for its future as a stable civilian-led democracy and reduces its chances of effectively addressing its wide range of socioeconomic and security problems.

Gary Brown
Foreign Affairs, Defence and
Trade Group
Information and Research
Services

3 April 2001

Views expressed in this Research Note are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Information and Research Services and are not to be attributed to the Department of the Parliamentary Library. Research Notes provide concise analytical briefings on issues of interest to Senators and Members. As such they may not canvass all of the key issues. Advice on legislation or legal policy issues contained in this paper is provided for use in parliamentary debate and for related parliamentary purposes. This paper is not professional legal opinion.

1. Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*, para 5.53.
2. *Portfolio Additional Estimates Statements: Defence 2000–01*, p. 85.
3. 'PNG army 'foraging' for food', *Australian Financial Review*, 17 November 2000.
4. In 1991 a Colonel Nuia went to Bougainville expressly against government orders, and there were rumours of plans for a military coup if Brigadier Ted Diro was dismissed from his position. N. Raath, 'Moral Support? Australia's Response to Papua New Guinea's Internal Security Problems', *Background Paper*, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 19 December 1991, pp. 22–3.
5. House of Representatives, *Hansard*, 25 February 1997, p. 1163, Answer to question without notice.
6. 'Commonwealth Secretary-General agrees to support Papua New Guinea's Defence Review' *Commonwealth News Release 00/96*, 7 November 2000.
7. 'Verdict delivered on military: retrain troops and cut costs', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 January 2001.
8. Michael Jeffrey, 'Criticism of EPG's role in PNG a bit unfair', Letter to the Editor, *Canberra Times*, 23 March 2001.
9. Kevin Ricketts, 'PNG soldiers end mutiny, hand back weapons' AAP Wire Service, 26 March 2001, Story No. 8928.
10. loc.cit.