

Australia to train specialized Pacific police intervention force

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported on June 14 that Australia's Labor government is moving to establish a 200-strong cohort of "highly trained Pacific police officers which could be deployed to regional hotspots" under a plan to strengthen Canberra's strategic position in the region.

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) has been working on the \$A800 million Pacific Policing Initiative for the past two years, and will be seeking endorsement at the Pacific Islands Forum leaders meeting in Tonga in August.

Training will take place at a "large and sophisticated" facility—a designated "Centre of Excellence"—in Pinkenba near Brisbane Airport, which will draw in rotations of police officers from Pacific countries. It will include a firing range as well as tactical response training facilities and be capable of hosting up to 50 officers at a time.

An official told the ABC the project would reinforce Australia's strategic position as the Pacific's main "security partner" to counter Beijing's efforts to strike bilateral policing deals with countries in the region. He declared the plans would be driven by the "whole Pacific region and its key security priorities."

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has already announced that Australia and Papua New Guinea (PNG) will set up a \$200 million regional police recruitment and training centre in Port Moresby that could serve as a model.

China has sent police training teams to several Pacific nations, including Solomon Islands and Kiribati, and has been seeking to do the same in other countries including PNG. Beijing has also set up a Pacific police training centre in China, where it has hosted officers from Vanuatu and Solomon Islands.

Australia's plan is part of the escalating US-led diplomatic, economic and military moves aimed at isolating and preparing for war against China. It follows threats of a regime change operation in the Solomon Islands by the US and Australia after Prime Minister Sogavare signed a security pact with China following riots in Honiara in 2021. Australia and New Zealand still have police and military

units stationed there.

New Zealand TV1 Pacific correspondent Barbara Dreaver, who first broke the story of the policing initiative, explained that the Brisbane training and co-ordination centre is one of three "pillars" of the project.

It also includes a dedicated unit of Australian and Pacific Islands officers with specialised training for rapid deployment to any "regional emergency." This "Pacific Police Support Group" would send teams of up to 75 officers to Pacific nations which "request help" to deal with critical situations including, but not limited to, natural disasters.

The third pillar involves establishing other "centres of excellence" in the Pacific. Chairman of the Pacific Chiefs of Police and Tonga's Police Commissioner, Shane McLennan, said Australia will provide "infrastructure, staffing and so forth to then allow [the host country] to really build upon what they've already got—but then deliver that capability across the Pacific."

According to the ABC, Pacific police chiefs are "enthusiastic" about the initiative and have already been working with Australian officers to "bed down" how it will work. One said the Pacific needed support and training to tackle "increasingly complex" criminal challenges, including the drugs trade.

McLennan explained that legislation will be needed to allow a "deployable force" to enter a country and have the "required protections" while operating under local jurisdictions. "We've got some legislation we are going to propose for our government here in Tonga," he said.

Australia and New Zealand, which exercise semi-colonial control over much of the Pacific, have for years embedded officials into the island nations, including judges, police, bureaucrats and military personnel. McLennan is an Australian who, before becoming Tonga's Police Commissioner in 2022, served in the AFP for 14 years. Australia is currently involved in the Blackrock "Peacekeeping Camp" in Fiji and a \$24 million Vanuatu-Australia Policing and Justice Program.

The imperialist powers have always used local crises to mobilise police and military to defend their geo-strategic and commercial interests. An International Deployment Group (IDG) was established within the AFP in 2004, under the pretext of the US-led “war on terror,” to aid military forces in the event of popular unrest in the Asia-Pacific.

The IDG’s role was underscored in November 2006 when a contingent was sent to Tonga, along with Australian and New Zealand military personnel, after riots in the capital Nuku’alofa. From 2003–2017 AFP officers formed the backbone of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which took control of key aspects of the impoverished country’s administration, including the police, legal system, prisons and finance ministry.

While the Pacific Policing Initiative has been in preparation for some time, it is being launched as a new wave of popular unrest—triggered by poverty, inequality and ongoing neo-colonial oppression—is exploding across the Pacific.

In January, PNG Prime Minister James Marape imposed a State of Emergency after simmering social discontent erupted after police and military personnel protested persistent underpayment. Buildings and shops were looted and torched in Port Moresby, with 22 deaths. Calls for a nationwide strike were raised.

PNG’s foreign minister, Justin Tkatchenko, was later forced to reaffirm his government’s security ties with Canberra after reports that PNG was considering a policing and security agreement with China. Beijing’s offer, first made last year, was repeated after the riots in which businesses owned by Chinese expatriates were looted and some owners injured.

Pacific islanders have joined the global protests against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. While small in numbers, the rallies and vigils, often defying authoritarian local governments and churches, were widespread in Fiji, Samoa, PNG, Cook Islands, New Caledonia, Micronesia, Saipan and Guam.

The most explosive opposition to colonial rule and social inequality can be seen in the French colony of New Caledonia. Rioting erupted on May 13, involving disaffected indigenous Kanak youth, after the French National Assembly voted for a constitutional change to widen rolls for local elections, reducing the relative weight of the Kanak vote.

After weeks of violent unrest, nine people have been killed and the capital Nouméa and surrounding districts devastated. Hundreds have been injured and over 1,200 arrested. Damage of €1 billion is estimated with up to 500 businesses and stores looted or destroyed by arson. Paris has mobilised some 3,700 troops and police, supported by riot control

vehicles, in an unsuccessful attempt to impose “Republican order.”

France’s crackdown has been met with outrage across the region. The Melanesian Spearhead Group, consisting of PNG, Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, bluntly blamed France for the riots and demanded it drop the electoral reform. Over two dozen NGOs condemned France for its “betrayal” of the Kanak population and the Macron government for its “poorly hidden agenda of prolonging colonial control over the territory.”

Australia and New Zealand, which sent military aircraft to evacuate their citizens, have said nothing that could be construed as criticising France, an ally in war preparations against China. Albanese said his government was “monitoring” the situation and evasively declared: “Australia values very much our relationship with both New Caledonia and the French state.”

Last year Australia supported France by abstaining on several UN decolonisation resolutions. In October Canberra’s UN representative objected to a call for administering powers to terminate military activities and eliminate military bases. Australia believed, she said, “in the sovereign rights of nations to defend the Territories they administer.”

Australia and New Zealand have been openly training for interventions to “restore order” in Pacific countries. Last month the NZ Army conducted “Exercise Vengeance,” designed to prepare troops to respond to natural disasters in the region or “civil disturbances, such as when the battalion deployed troops to the Solomon Islands in 2021 to support local police,” according to the *New Zealand Herald*.

The biennial multinational Southern Katipo war games in New Zealand, and the Talisman Sabre exercises in Australia, have also included regular rehearsals for armed incursions to quell civil unrest and impose police-military order in the Pacific.



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