

Big Brother Australia is breathing down tiny neighbours' neck

By Ross Peake (Down Under)

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AUSTRALIA has become embroiled in squabbles with two of its smaller neighbours, giving the impression to outsiders that it is a regional bully. In fact, John Howard's government is trying to save poor regional countries from themselves.

At times it is called patronising, but Canberra has the region's long term interests at heart, as well as its own security.

However, questions are being asked about Australia's respect for sovereignty. It feels free to give gratuitous advice and exert pressure, but objects strongly when outsiders criticise it, for example, over the living standards of some of its indigenous people, the Aborigines. This week Canberra is involved in spats with the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.

Australia used to govern PNG, which lies to its immediate north, and is the site of a historic World War II battle. The Japanese army landed in the north of the nation and marched south through the jungle towards the PNG capital, Port Moresby, with the intention of invading the northern part of Australia. The Japanese seemed unstoppable until brave Australian troops, known as Diggers, halted their progress on the Kokoda Track.

To Australians, that heroic battle in the mud and torrential rain has become an iconic symbol of bravery against impossible odds. Thousands of Australians now make the rugged pilgrimage each year over the 96 km track that winds through the mountains to the north of Port Moresby, to honour the Australians who died in the historic battle that was the first defeat for the Japanese invaders. Now there is outrage in Australia that an Australian mining company is considering building a gold mine that would cut the track. Frontier Resources has begun exploration drilling for gold deposits said to be worth A\$1.3 billion.

The company says the poverty-stricken people who own the land are in desperate need of development, jobs and revenue. But Prime Minister Howard, who has a keen sense of history, is leading an angry revolt against the development. He sent his top bureaucrats into the PNG jungle last week to see for themselves how the "sacred site" would be affected. PNG is objecting strongly to this intervention from the "big brother" nation and the diplomatic rift is likely to come to a head when Howard meets his PNG counterpart Michael Somare at the Pacific Islands Forum this month. Just one section of the contentious mining and exploration lease overlaps the Kokoda Track. But will the company forgo any riches found in the section under the track? Probably not. The PNG High Commissioner to Australia, Charles Lepani, echoes the company's sentiment that a substantial gold find would be hard to ignore. "I would imagine the land owners on the track will be more sympathetic to having the company develop that, if the resource justifies it, than not have it developed," he told The Canberra Times.

PNG is astounded at what it believes is Australia's heavy-handed over-reaction. PNG Mining Minister Sam Akoitai says his government will do its best to protect the trail. In a twist, Howard is being accused of double standards for protesting about possible damage to the Kokoda Track but not doing enough to protect some of the oldest and most important rock carvings on Earth. The endangered Aboriginal art is in West Australia's Burrup Peninsula where Woodside Petroleum wants to build a national gas plant.

Canberra's spat with the Solomon Islands is a more serious diplomatic rift. Australia's High Commissioner in the Solomons, Patrick Cole, has been expelled among great controversy. His sin? Meeting opposition politicians. Diplomats are paid to plug into the local happenings and report back the political intrigues to their masters. The real reason for the extraordinary action by the Solomons is its embarrassment that Australia has highlighted a scandal in the capital, Honiara. Solomons Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare has established an inquiry into the riots that swept Honiara in April.

Australia believes the inquiry is being used to clear two jailed MPs who are charged with inciting the riots. Importantly, Australia has repeatedly pointed to corruption in the Solomons and has sent in hundreds of police as part of the Australian-led mission trying to restore law and order and root out corruption. However the embarrassed government in Honiara wants to "salami slice" the mission to put less focus on forensic investigations into high-level corruption. Howard is clearly going to hold firm on making the Solomons face up to corruption, and pressuring PNG to preserve the historic battlefield, no matter if the neighbours think Canberra is acting like a bully.

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