

‘A Bloody Boycott’, Foreign Correspondent, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 19 July 2016

[Transcript]

STEVEN LIKAS: You know this bullet just landed onto my head [points to head]. I have to run, because the police they would just come to, you know, just kill me.

ERIC TLOZEK: In a nation seemingly desensitised by corruption and violence, it was one clash too many. The police crackdown on a student protest that now has Papua New Guinea’s Prime Minister fighting for his political life.

PETER O’NEILL: [PRIME MINISTER] It could have been handled a bit better.

SIR MICHAEL SOMARE: I think it’s madness!

SAM KOIM: The evidence was overwhelming for us to mount a case against the Prime Minister.

ERIC TLOZEK: A controversial \$30 million payment order, civil disobedience and an opposition out to depose him, it’s shaping up as a tough week for Prime Minister Peter O’Neill.

CHRISTOPHER KIPALAN: It’s a total fight against corruption; nothing more, nothing less.

[TITLES]: Port Moresby, PNG

A Bloody Boycott

Reporter: Eric Tlozek

ERIC TLOZEK: Papua New Guinea can be a wild, tribal land, but this is not the remote highlands. It’s a university campus in the capital, Port Moresby, and the aftermath of a student-led protest against corruption, that went terribly wrong.

CHRISTOPHER KIPALAN: My name is Christopher Kipalan. And I’m from the highlands of Papua New Guinea in Enga Province. I am painting my body; I am painting my face to show that I’m still in the mourning house where I will not attend to any classes.

ERIC TLOZEK: A few days earlier, police had fired on a group of unarmed students at PNG’s biggest university. No-one died, but at least eight people were hospitalised with gunshot wounds.

ERIC TLOZEK [standing with students applying mud to their bodies]: These guys are all

from Enga, one of the highland's provinces, and it's two Engans who suffered some of the worst injuries in the shooting last week. And this is their cultural ritual. This is how they show their outrage at what was done to the other students.

TRACY PONAK: My name is Tracy Ponak. I'm from Laigam in Enga Province and I'm a final year law student at UPNG. I'm doing this is because the Prime Minister is not respecting and upholding the integrity of the office of the Prime Minister, and also he didn't allow the police to investigate him and question him. So he's not respecting the law. He thinks he's above the law.

ERIC TLOZEK: For weeks, students have refused to attend class – despite pressure from the university to resume their studies. Today, this group is marching around the campus, imploring classmates to hold their nerve.

STUDENT: Four of our men are in ICU, so I'm not in the mood to go to class. I've painted my face and I'm walking around.

CHRISTOPHER KIPALAN: The student didn't take a bullet to protect a land boundary. He didn't take a bullet to protect his wife or his pig. He took a bullet for Papua New Guinea!

ERIC TLOZEK: Wednesday, June the 8th, the morning of the shooting, the protest starts peacefully enough. Students are demanding Prime Minister Peter O'Neill step aside and allow police to interview him about corruption allegations. Most dress up, expecting to go to parliament and express their views to the nation's leaders. But when they try to leave the campus, heavily armed police are waiting.

TRACY PONAK: So we wanted to do a peaceful protest to the parliament. We weren't armed. We didn't even carry any gun or stones, sticks or whatever. We just raised our hand and we were unarmed.

PROTESTER: You don't know what is going on in this country. We are fighting on behalf of you!

ERIC TLOZEK: There's a stand-off. Then, Port Moresby's police chief tries to arrest the president of the Student Representative Council, Kenneth Rapa. The students rush forward to protect their president. The police respond with tear gas, and then live ammunition. Some students flee across a field behind the university, and then seek sanctuary in a nearby settlement, one of the poorer parts of Port Moresby. They say police follow them in.

CHRISTOPHER KIPALAN: While we were running into the bush they were shooting us and they were like hunters looking for animals.

ERIC TLOZEK: As police comb the settlement, students back at the university set fire to a truck to create a diversion, hoping, they say, to help their friends escape.

MALE: Running for their life.

ERIC TLOZEK: It works, but police responding to the burning truck fire more shots, and one student is hit in the head. The news filters back to parliament.

PETER O'NEILL: [PRIME MINISTER] I am told that there has been some shots fired, but also some tear gas – unconfirmed reports coming through.

PARLIAMENTARIAN: They are students! They are our future national leaders! You shut your mouth! You shut up!

ERIC TLOZEK: Peter O'Neill came to power five years ago in unusual circumstances. The Prime Minister at the time was Sir Michael Somare, considered the father of independence and one of Papua New Guinea's grand chiefs.

SIR MICHAEL SOMARE: My health is as good as any. I'm old enough to be a 40 year old again.

ERIC TLOZEK: But Sir Michael spent months in Singapore receiving medical treatment. Peter O'Neill gained the support of MPs and made his move. A vote here in parliament gave him the top job. But Sir Michael fought back, and for a while Papua New Guinea had two men claiming to be Prime Minister.

PETER O'NEILL: I am the Prime Minister of the country, and Somare is trying to hijack it with some hooligan policemen.

ERIC TLOZEK: The Supreme Court ruled in favour of Sir Michael, but the parliament stuck with Mr O'Neill. Part of Peter O'Neill's appeal was his strong anti-corruption stance. He set up an investigative body called Taskforce Sweep, and it was widely applauded for rooting out corruption.

SAM KOIM, CHAIRMAN: [TASKFORCE SWEEP] My name is Sam Koim, and I am the chairman of Investigation Taskforce Sweep. We've arrested well over ninety people and charged them. And a number of people are in gaol including the former Minister for National Planning. Higher up the corruption, legislative corruption, political corruption, and this is a corruption that is depriving our people at the grandest scale.

ERIC TLOZEK: But two years ago the taskforce Peter O'Neill created turned its sights on him. It alleged he authorised a \$30 million fraudulent payment from the finance department to a law firm.

SAM KOIM: The evidence was overwhelming for us to mount a case against the Prime Minister.

ERIC TLOZEK: Peter O'Neill denied the accusation, saying his signature had been forged. When anti-corruption police issued a warrant for his arrest, Mr. O'Neill obtained court orders preventing police from arresting him. He sacked the Attorney-General and the Police Commissioner. But he tried to disband Taskforce Sweep, but that was overturned in court.

ERIC TLOZEK: [to Mr Koim] And what's happened since June 2014 when you sought to arrest the Prime Minister?

SAM KOIM: Well it's now two years since we did that. We served the arrest warrant on the Prime Minister. We gave him two hours and that two hours has been extended to two years now.

PETER O'NEILL: [Press conference] Nobody is above the law. Everybody is subject to the law. I have exercised my constitutional right that I can challenge the issues that the police are taking on board.

SAM KOIM: If we claim to be a democratic country on the one hand, and on the other hand we do not observe the fundamentals that make up a democracy, then we don't have a democracy. When you suppress all of that and when you tamper with all of that, what you are doing is you are brewing up popular discontentment which is a recipe for revolution. It's bound to explode.

ERIC TLOZEK: [Driving to safe house] Since the shooting at the university, Student Council President, Kenneth Rapa, has been on the run. His lawyer takes us to his safe house in Port Moresby.

MALE: He's inside?

ERIC TLOZEK: Hey, Kenneth? Hello, nice to see you.

KENNETH RAPA: If the police can shoot the students on sight, then just imagine other people. They would not hesitate to kill me or my student leaders, so in fear of me being shot by other parties and even the police...

ERIC TLOZEK: Surrounded by supporters, Kenneth Rapa explains what he says is driving the student protests.

KENNETH RAPA: [UPNG SRC PRESIDENT] We have nothing against Honourable Peter O'Neill or anyone on that matter. All what the students are saying is we are fighting for our office, the office of eight million people. It's about guiding the democracy that this nation has.

ERIC TLOZEK: As his lawyer discusses his prospects, there's a reminder of the dangers of

Port Moresby.

KENNETH RAPA: Both means good for Kenneth. [gunshot]. Yes. Oh god.

ERIC TLOZEK: What was that? What was that noise?

KENNETH RAPA: Oh, that was a gunshot. We don't know if it's police or some criminal elements; we're not sure. But there was a gunshot from a high-powered gun. I don't think it's home-made.

ERIC TLOZEK: The gunshot, just a few hundred metres away, goes almost unnoticed by most of the party. They finish their food, pray, and then Kenneth slips off into the night.

ERIC TLOZEK: [at hospital] It's two days after the shooting at the university. The most seriously injured students have been brought here, to Port Moresby General Hospital. Madimax Rex – better known as 'Mad Max' – was filming the protest and says a policeman tried to grab his camera.

MAD MAX: I tried to escape – he pulled the stand of the camera. So we were struggling. He pulled the stand, I pulled the camera. And, in the process he punched me. He punched me, he slapped me. I got a bullet at the back and it penetrated to the stomach. When I was unconscious I lost the camera, but I'd managed to pull out the memory card.

ERIC TLOZEK: Stephen Likas was shot later in the day, near the burning truck.

ERIC TLOZEK: Is the bullet out or still in?

STEPHEN LIKAS: Yesterday, I went for an operation and the doctor successfully removed the pellets.

ERIC TLOZEK: His mother, Christa, flew in from remote Enga Province to be at his side.

CHRISTA: When I heard my child was hurt, I wanted to die. I wanted to jump into a river. He was the first born son, and so naturally he was going to support the other kids to go to school. His father and his brothers are all illiterate, and we sold many pigs to pay for him to go to university.

ERIC TLOZEK: As we leave the hospital, another visitor arrives, Student Council President, Kenneth Rapa, venturing out of hiding.

ERIC TLOZEK: What are you doing here, today? Can you tell me about it?

KENNETH RAPA: I'm visiting my boys.

ERIC TLOZEK: Who are you visiting?

KENNETH RAPA: The boys that got shot last time. We'll visit today.

ERIC TLOZEK: How are you feeling?

KENNETH RAPA: Scared, terrified, worried, sad.

ERIC TLOZEK: What are you going to tell them?

KENNETH RAPA: Be strong.

ERIC TLOZEK: Both the Prime Minister and Police Commissioner declined the ABC's requests for interviews. But in public statements, the Prime Minister claimed the students had been incited to protest by the opposition.

PETER O'NEILL:[PRIME MINISTER] It has come to light that this confrontation was unnecessary. It could have been handled a bit better by of course not allowing these sort of confrontations to take place. Unfortunately there are certain elements within the student group influenced by outsiders, obviously with their self-interest but particularly a political interest, who have been visiting the students on many occasions.

KENNETH RAPA: [UPNG SRC PRESIDENT] What the government is saying is an insult to the intellectual generation of this country. We are not being pushed by anybody or dictated by anybody. We are doing it because of the knowledge that we have. We know, we understand.

GARI BAKI: [POLICE COMMISSIONER] We will conduct our own internal investigations and enquiry as to the nature of the injuries that have been sustained by the students and those members of the public. Part of the investigations will also include the conduct of the SRC President and the members of the SRC at the university.

ERIC TLOZEK: The University is in lock down. The police guarding the campus deny the shootings even happened.

POLICEMAN: Yeah, nobody shot anybody! Nobody shot anybody. Straightforward. We just used gas to disperse the students. That's all. Just gas. Just gas.

ERIC TLOZEK: So, where did the gunshot wounds come from?

POLICEMAN: Who knows? Guns are everywhere in this country.

[Footage of police kicking and acting aggressively with police dogs while arresting people]

ERIC TLOZEK: Police in PNG have a reputation for brutality. From excessive force and trigger-happy raids, to bare-knuckle fight clubs and bizarre punishments for suspected offenders, the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary has become widely feared.

TRACY PONAK: We're just not scared of the 'raskols' anymore – we're scared of the police.

ERIC TLOZEK: Australia gives more than half a billion dollars in aid each year to PNG, and the Australian Federal Police has 70 officers here providing training and support. Just one week after the students were shot, the AFP officially handed over a million dollars worth of housing to the police. But not just to any police – to the same division involved in the shooting.

ERIC TLOZEK: It's the first Sunday after the shooting and Father Victor Roche wants to address the issue in his sermon at Port Moresby's St. Joseph's Church.

[Congregation singing in church]

FATHER VICTOR ROCHE: We are sorry, as most of you are sorry at the situation that we are in. So many students were shot and wounded. We are very sorry at the situation. Thank god that nobody is dead!

ERIC TLOZEK: About 30 per cent of Papua New Guineans are Catholic, making the church the largest denomination in this staunchly Christian country.

FATHER VICTOR ROCHE: So no, no revenge.

ERIC TLOZEK: The country's Catholic bishops say the allegations of corruption need to be resolved.

FATHER VICTOR ROCHE: We do not want an escalation of this violence.

FATHER VICTOR ROCHE: [CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE] We are afraid that if they're not dealt with now, it will go more and more and there will be further escalation of violence. And that's why the Catholic Church would appeal to the leaders that there should be wisdom that prevails.

ERIC TLOZEK: The best-known parishioner at St. Joseph's is Papua New Guinea's founding Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare, the man Peter O'Neill ousted.

FATHER VICTOR ROCHE: He's waiting for you.

ERIC TLOZEK: Father Roche takes us to meet him. Sir Michael says Peter O'Neill should step aside and allow the corruption allegations to be dealt with.

SIR MICHAEL SOMARE: [FORMER PRIME MINISTER] People feel that the government is corrupt and if it's corrupt, the man on the top should give himself in and say, okay, come and find out what's happened here. He doesn't have to resign as the Prime Minister, step aside as the Prime Minister, allow acting Prime Minister to run the show while he's answering questions. Get the Commander of the Police to step aside. Get the police team together and tell them these are the kind of things you do, you know? You cause aggravation, you cause people to revolt, provoking, you don't provoke them. Talk to them nicely and they are well educated kids, they'll go back and think about it there.

MALE HAUS KRAI LEADER [SINGING]: We have the answer! We have the answer!

ERIC TLOZEK: In the days after the bloodshed, a small group of influential women offer to act as mediators between the police and the students. They gather in the capital to hold a traditional mourning ceremony, or 'haus krai'.

FEMALE HAUS KRAI LEADER: Think of our students who were hurt and injured on the 8th of June last week.

ESMIE SINAPA: We are a violent society, we must acknowledge that. We have domestic violence, we have sorcery, we have tribal fights, we have shootings, we have police brutality, we have all that. We cannot be quiet anymore.

ERIC TLOZEK: The women say they're politically neutral. But, to prevent further violence, they want the Prime Minister to deal with the corruption allegations.

ESMIE SINAPA: [WOMEN ARISE] Right now he needs to regain the trust and the respect of the country, and the women are calling for that. We want him to realise that before he's a Prime Minister he's a human being and he's a son of Papua New Guinea, and he came from a mother and so he needs to respect our wishes.

ERIC TLOZEK: There's no such unity among the students. After the shooting, the University of PNG is closed. The Vice Chancellor calls for classes to resume, ratcheting up the tension between students who want to get back to their studies and those determined to maintain the boycott.

STUDENT: They want Prime Minister Peter O'Neill to step aside as soon as possible. He steps aside, classes will continue.

ERIC TLOZEK: The boycott triggers clashes between students across the country. In Lae a student is killed by other students – though the reasons for the attack remain disputed. In Port Moresby, the university eventually decides to abandon the academic year, declaring the campus unsafe.

DR. NICHOLAS MANN: [UPNG CHANCELLOR] The rule of law has been replaced by mob rule, intimidation, harassment and violence. The learning environment has been turned into a tribal war zone with painted faces, war cries, knife-wielding persons.

ERIC TLOZEK: Eventually the students disperse, returning home, their education on hold. In the weeks following the shootings, opposition against Peter O'Neill continues to grow. Last week, a pilots strike grounded domestic and international flights. Across town, a crowd gathers outside parliament, as the opposition moves to bring down the Prime Minister.

PARLIAMENTARIAN: The purpose of this parliament is not to call for the entertainment of any other motion other than to introduce the motion for a vote of no confidence, and to adjourn it.

ERIC TLOZEK: Peter O'Neill now faces a parliamentary vote of no confidence this Friday. As for the student marchers who triggered this political crisis, many are now dispersed to settlements and villages across the country. Steven Likas has left hospital, and is recovering at a relative's house, his mother still by his side. More details emerge about the shooting.

ERIC TLOZEK: Why did the police shoot you?

STEVEN LIKAS: They shot me because, you know, I was with the students out there. I have to go in and get my belongings out. And so when I was going out there, they just came in and, you know, shoot me.

ERIC TLOZEK: Were you setting fire to the truck?

STEVEN LIKAS: No, no, no. I was with the students, and some of the students they burned the truck out there. So I have to go and get my stuff out, so they shot me. Just they came in and shot me.

ERIC TLOZEK: His immediate future is unclear, but he remains undaunted by the shooting, refusing to take off the bloodstained jacket he was wearing when shot.

STEVEN LIKAS: It was my blood saved this country. Corruption come to a head. When I see this, it's telling me that, you know, I've saved this country with my blood.

ERIC TLOZEK: In reality though, ending corruption is still a dream. Peter O'Neill might no longer be Prime Minister after a no confidence vote in parliament this Friday. But the problem in PNG is bigger than any one man.

KENNETH RAPA: We don't have to sit around and look for people to give us the answers. We are the answer. We have to stand up.

CHRISTOPHER KIPALAN: And I for one and my other fellow students, we are willing to

pay any sacrifice that is required to maintain the rule of law and weed out corruption.

SAM KOIM: The country needs powerful institutions, not powerful individuals.