

# Delegation to the Solomon Islands

## Introduction

- 1.1 In July 2003 the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was launched. One of the first objectives was to restore law and order and provide the economic, financial and social framework for the Solomon Islands to rebuild and strengthen its institutions and quality of life for its citizens. The Australian Government together with other countries in the region provided significant assistance.
- 1.2 In view of the importance of RAMSI in promoting institutional stability and enhancing regional security, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade sought approval for a small delegation of members to visit the Solomon Islands. This approval was granted and a small delegation of the Parliament comprising six members of the committee visited the Solomons between 17-18 December 2003.
- 1.3 The delegation's objectives included observing progress of RAMSI and noting the key outcomes and support provided to the Solomon Islands. The delegation met with the Prime Minister and senior Ministers of the Solomon Islands. In addition, a range of briefings was provided by Australian Government officials.
- 1.4 This report discusses the situation in the Solomon Islands prior to RAMSI, and outlines some of the key features of the assistance package. RAMSI has achieved significant outcomes for the Solomon Islands but possibly more importantly, it has provided a model for future assistance within the region.

## The Solomon Islands – events leading up to RAMSI

### Colonial history

- 1.5 From the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Solomons were subject to British colonial administration. Some of the reasons for British involvement included the aim of helping to reduce transnational crime, and preventing another colonial power from establishing a presence.
- 1.6 During World War II, the United States became interested in the role of the Solomon Islands as a strategic base. In 1942 the Japanese built an airstrip at the site of the current airport at Honiara. This location provided the Japanese with a significant base from which to attack allied operations in the South West Pacific. As a result, allied forces including the US, Australian and New Zealand undertook an assault to expel the Japanese and capture the airstrip.
- 1.7 After World War II, the British renewed their colonial presence. In 1978 the Solomons received independence. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), in their seminal report on the Solomon Islands, commented that the ‘colonial administration of Solomon Islands was perfunctory, and little effort was made to develop the country economically or socially.’<sup>1</sup>
- 1.8 The transition to nationhood from an incomplete base in which key institutions were not fully developed presented the Solomon Islands with many challenges including inadequate revenue bases, poor economic performance and high population growth.

### Contemporary issues

- 1.9 The Solomon Islands’ colonial past has not provided the base from which the country can prosper. The population is approximately 500 000 people covering thousands of islands. The GDP per head is US\$530 with many people relying on a mix of cash cropping and subsistence fishing and agriculture.<sup>2</sup> Solomon Islands’ leadership during the late 1980s has been described as erratic with growing levels of corruption under successive governments. ASPI commented that ‘foreign investment in the Solomon Islands’ natural resources—especially its timber—provided opportunities for corruption to become entrenched in public life in Honiara.’<sup>3</sup>

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1 Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), *Our Failing Neighbour, Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, June 2003, p. 19.

2 ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour, Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, June 2003, p. 19.

3 ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour, Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, June 2003, p. 20.

- 1.10 Pivotal events occurred in 1998 and 1999 which pushed the Solomon Islands ‘over the edge.’ Ethnic disputes erupted between local people on Guadalcanal and people from the island of Malaita. The focus of these disputes was over land in and outside Honiara. For many years since American occupation during WWII, Malaitans moved to Guadalcanal for work and have settled through the area. ASPI commented that ‘over two generations Malaitans came to dominate both Guadalcanal’s agricultural economy and a large proportion of the jobs in Honiara itself, including the public service.’<sup>4</sup>
- 1.11 As economic conditions in the Solomon Islands became more severe, resentment grew among Guadalcanalese towards Malaitans. In 1998 a group of Guadalcanal men presented the Government with a set of demands for reform. When these were not met, Guadalcanal men, many of whom were formed into militias called the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA) or the Isatabu Freedom Movement, used force and intimidation against Malaitans occupying land on Guadalcanal.
- 1.12 The Malaitans responded by creating their own militias, the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF). Clashes between the GRA and MEF resulted in significant casualties and a rise of lawlessness and a further deterioration in the economy. An unfortunate element involved the MEF drawing on large numbers of Malaitans in the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP) and, in particular, its well armed field force. This chain of events led to a downward spiral for the economy, public administration and social development. ASPI stated:
- The government became paralysed in the face of these problems, especially as the police themselves were now deeply split along ethnic lines. Law and order collapsed. The key export earners—the Gold Ridge gold mine, a handful of tourist resorts and the country’s main oil palm plantations—ceased operations. The economy faltered, government revenue plummeted, and public services were disrupted.<sup>5</sup>
- 1.13 The economy suffered during this period. In 2000 GDP fell by 14 per cent and a further 10 per cent in 2001. Between 1996 and 2000 exports fell by 60 per cent and GDP per capita has halved in real terms since independence in 1978.<sup>6</sup>
- 1.14 International concern about the Solomon Islands deteriorating position and increasing ethnic disputes led to a Commonwealth mediation effort

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4 ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour, Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, June 2003, p. 21.

5 ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour, Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, June 2003, p. 21.

6 ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour, Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, June 2003, p. 25.

led from London by Sitiveni Rabuka, former Prime Minister of Fiji. Lawlessness and ethnic disputes during mid 2000, however, continued which led to Australia and New Zealand evacuating foreign nationals. Following this, a peace conference in Townsville was organised in October 2000. ASPI commented that under the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) ‘an early ceasefire was to become permanent, and an Australian led and funded International Peace Monitoring Team was to receive and impound weapons surrendered under a disarmament program.’<sup>7</sup>

### Australia’s early policy response

- 1.15 Australia’s policy response prior to the regional assistance mission was the provision of aid funding. In 2002-03 the level of aid was \$35 million, and during the past two years, Australia has contributed \$80 million.
- 1.16 In 2000 the then Solomon Islands Prime Minister Bart Ulufa’alua requested Australia to send police or military to assist in protecting him and his government from a coup. Australia declined on the grounds that Australia had already contributed resources to a Commonwealth response that included a police detachment. In addition, there was not bipartisan support in the Solomon Islands for the request.
- 1.17 ASPI suggested that Australia’s previous reluctance to become too heavily involved in the affairs of other countries was a concern that its involvement would be ‘seen as neo-colonialism.’<sup>8</sup> ASPI agrees that any solution to the problems facing countries of the South Pacific must avoid the perils of neocolonialism. However, ASPI suggested that Australia must find a way ahead that avoids overtones of neocolonialism yet which helps the Solomon Islands to rebuild. ASPI commented that the simple provision of aid funding is unlikely to fix the deep seated problems that exist and may even exacerbate them. ASPI stated:

There is growing recognition of the need to intervene in failing and failed states—that is in the interests of regional and global security to reconstruct the institutions, governance and economy of such countries. While the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention are still the cornerstones of the international system, there has been a change in the concept of sovereignty, and a growing body of thinking about the place of intervention within the international system.<sup>9</sup>

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7 ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour, Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, June 2003, p. 23.

8 ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour, Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, June 2003, p. 9.

9 ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour, Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, June 2003, p. 29.

- 1.18 Since the tragic events of 9-11, a further imperative to assist failing states to rebuild is to ensure that they do not become havens for terrorists. As a result, there is even greater responsibility on developed nations to assist and help reduce this possible outcome. ASPI commented that the 'kind of legal vacuum so close to our shores would make Australia significantly more vulnerable to transnational criminal operations based in or operating out of Solomon Islands—drug smuggling, gun-running, identity fraud and people smuggling, for example.'<sup>10</sup>

## **Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI)**

- 1.19 The purpose of RAMSI is to provide strengthened international assistance to the Solomon Islands Government. RAMSI is a comprehensive international package of assistance. Australia's initial contribution to RAMSI comprised approximately 1500 Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel, 155 Australian Federal Police (AFP), and 90 personnel from the Australian protective services. In October 2003 the Defence Minister, Senator the Hon Robert Hill, announced a reduction in ADF contribution which would result in a drawdown to about 500 by December 2003.
- 1.20 The ADF contingent was initially led by Lieutenant Colonel John Frewen who was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Quentin Flowers on 17 November 2003.
- 1.21 The AFP contingent is led by Deputy Police Commissioner, Mr Ben McDevitt. Mr Nick Warner, Special Coordinator is in charge of the mission. Australia's involvement in the Solomons is called Operation Helpem Fren. The ADF commitment to RAMSI is called Operation Anode.
- 1.22 RAMSI's first priority was to restore law and order. Three hundred police officers were drawn from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, Tonga, Kiribati and the Cook Islands to support the RSIP.
- 1.23 In view of the large numbers of weapons in the community, the police contingent was backed up by a military component. The military force comprised personnel from Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Tonga. During September/October the military component totalled 1 800 troops.
- 1.24 The delegation noted that while RAMSI will conclude, Australia's long term commitment to the Solomon Islands may need to continue for up to 10 years.

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10 ASPI, *Our Failing Neighbour, Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, June 2003, p. 14.

## Delegation meetings and key issues

- 1.25 During the one and a half day visit to the Solomon Islands, the delegation met with a range of key groups both from RAMSI and the Solomon Islands. In addition, the delegation travelled by helicopter to Malaita and the Weathercoast. While in Honiara, the delegation was given a detailed tour of the RAMSI base.

Figure 1.1 The delegation arriving at Isuna (Weathercoast)



## Law and order

- 1.26 Mr Nick Warner, Special Coordinator, RAMSI, together with his team reported on the performance and outcomes of RAMSI. The first objective of the mission was to restore law and order. At the time that RAMSI commenced in July 2003 there was rampant gun use and violence. The Australian Federal Police (AFP) supported by the Australian Defence Force (ADF) had effectively quelled this lawlessness.
- 1.27 Through a number of gun amnesties, almost 4000 illegal firearms had been collected and impounded. During this exercise, the AFP reported that not one shot had been fired and not one gun related crime committed.
- 1.28 The AFP has been busy managing the gun amnesties and helping the RSIP to become a more effective police force. Since the start of RAMSI, there have been over six hundred arrests and over 1100 charges laid. Some of these charges relate to serious criminal offences including rape, murder, abduction and arson.

- 1.29 The delegation found that there were still some concerns about law and order until those charged had been dealt with properly by the law. In particular, it was essential that the judicial process be carried out as quickly and effectively as possible and those found guilty should be sentenced.
- 1.30 While numbers in the RSIP are low, the reforms make it harder for people to get in and easy for some of the existing officers to leave. One of the key focus areas for the AFP is mentoring and coaching members of the RSIP.

Figure 1.2 Meeting with community representatives at Isuna (Weathercoast)



- 1.31 The AFP advised that a review of the RSIP was underway. There are 15 terms of reference focusing on recruitment policies and human resource management practices. The review also includes examination of the police maritime division which is responsible for patrolling borders and protecting against illegal fishing.
- 1.32 On 2 February 2004 the Government announced an expansion in Australia's capacity to contribute to regional law enforcement. The Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator the Hon Chris Ellison, stated that 'Australia's ability to fight terrorism, transnational organised crime and contribute to regional peacekeeping missions will be significantly strengthened with the formation of an AFP International Deployment Group' (IDG).<sup>11</sup>

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11 Senator the Hon Chris Ellison, Minister for Justice and Customs, *Media Release*, Australia Boosts regional capacity law enforcement capacity, 2 February 2004.

- 1.33 The Government commented that the 'IDG will lock in a long-term strategic approach to managing the complex and diverse challenges of this new age of policing.'<sup>12</sup>

Figure 1.3 Briefing from Mr Ben McDevitt, Deputy Commissioner, AFP



- 1.34 The IDG 'will include almost 500 personnel, drawn from the ranks of the AFP, Australian Protective Service (APS) and negotiated staffing contributed by State and Territory police services.'<sup>13</sup>
- 1.35 The delegation through its visit to the Solomons was able to witness the fine work performed by the AFP. The creation of the IDG is a positive initiative and should provide Australia with enhanced capacity to provide assistance to peacekeeping and law enforcement operations in the region.

### ADF contribution and activities

- 1.36 The ADF, together with the military contributions from New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and Papua New Guinea, have played a key role in RAMSI. The military force provides essential logistical support and, in the event of aggression, would provide the police contingent with serious firepower thus contributing to the security of the country.

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12 Senator the Hon Chris Ellison, Minister for Justice and Customs, *Media Release*, Australia Boosts regional capacity law enforcement capacity, 2 February 2004.

13 Senator the Hon Chris Ellison, Minister for Justice and Customs, *Media Release*, Australia Boosts regional capacity law enforcement capacity, 2 February 2004.

- 1.37 The delegation was escorted through the RAMSI base to observe the extent of the logistical support. The key features include a headquarters with a range of communications, medical facilities, accommodation and transport services.
- 1.38 In addition to providing logistical support, the military force provides a maritime and air element. Operations focus on providing security on the ground where potential threats exist. Troops are, for example, co-located with police at relevant posts.
- 1.39 The military force originally consisted of about 1800 personnel and at the time of the visit this had reduced to 800. As law and order progresses, the troop drawdown will continue but not completely.
- 1.40 On 23 December 2003 the Government announced a new award for service in the Solomons. The Minister assisting the Minister for Defence, the Hon Mal Brough, MP, stated that ‘the Australian Service Medal with Clasp Solomon Is II will be awarded to ADF personnel who rendered service and completed operational sorties over a period of 30 days, continuous or aggregate, in the area of operations.’<sup>14</sup>
- 1.41 The delegation supports this initiative as a further gesture of appreciation to Australian personnel deployed on overseas operations.

Figure 1.4 ADF personnel at RAMSI Base, Honiara



14 Hon Mal Brough, MP, Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence, *Media Release*, New Award for Service in the Solomons, 23 December 2003.

## Reforms to public administration and the economy

- 1.42 With law and order on the improve, the next challenge was to promote and help develop effective public administration. Key government institutions needed to be operating and seen to be effective. Some of the key areas that were being enhanced included budgetary management, expenditure control, electoral processes and accountability mechanisms. Through making progress in these areas, greater confidence is developing which is slowly flowing through to the market economy.
- 1.43 In relation to the broader Solomon Islands economy, broad based revival is required. Youth unemployment, for example, is averaging more than 40 per cent.
- 1.44 It was clear from the briefings provided to the delegation, that the support provided through RAMSI came at the right time. Peace has been restored and public institutions are starting to function more effectively. Initial observations about the recovery suggest that Honiara is more vibrant and there is more economic activity.
- 1.45 Australia is providing 17 financial advisers to the Solomon Islands Finance Ministry. These advisers are focusing on assisting with developing financial frameworks, and ensuring that the 2004 Budget is as sound as can be. The following focus areas for the Budget are measures for education, health and infrastructure. Some of the key economic reform objectives include:
- public sector reform: during much of the instability, public servants were not being paid;
  - police reform;
  - reform of state owned enterprises; and
  - improvements to revenue collection.
- 1.46 Corruption within public institutions has been a major issue. The changes brought on by RAMSI are helping to improve accountability and develop a cultural change within organisations. There is widespread support for reform in this area.
- 1.47 Members of the Solomon Islands parliament, raised the view that an important part of stabilising the economy was through helping to revitalise the village level economy. In particular, the Copra trade was an area where growth was needed and in the future, looking to Australian assistance, further development was needed in fisheries and aquaculture. It was suggested that a beche de mer hatchery (sandfish hatchery) could be a possibility for the Solomon Islands.

Figure 1.5 Meeting with Opposition Members of the Parliament of the Solomon Islands



## Aid assistance

- 1.48 The level of Australian aid to the Solomon Islands has increased from between \$11 to 12 million in 1997-98 to \$87.4 million in 2003-04. Some of the key focus areas of aid have been assisting in achieving budget stabilisation and economic reform. Through these measures, government finances are stabilising, and government revenues are on the rise. The delegation was advised that the efforts show the clear momentum and results that bureaucracy can achieve when it is functioning effectively and with accountability.
- 1.49 The delegation visited some of the aid projects undertaken in recent times. These included the Rove Prison which has recently been completed and is serving a vital function as law and order is established.
- 1.50 In addition, the delegation was briefed on the operation of the Pacific Patrol Boat Program which is designed to help the Solomons and other countries that are part of the program to enhance the policing of their maritime zones. The Solomon Islands has two patrol boats under the scheme.
- 1.51 Some members of the delegation were briefed on the AusAID supported Community Peace and Restoration Fund (CPRF). The CPRF was established as a response to the internal unrest and conflict in the Solomon Islands that contributed to a break down in basic services, especially in rural communities.

- 1.52 Through the CPRF, aid is provided directly to communities with the priority provinces being Guadalcanal and Malaita. There are 670 projects which are supported with a budget of just over A\$7 million. The aid provision focuses on those areas in which communities can not provide for themselves. Small grants are provided to community groups for rehabilitation, restoration and peace building. Some of the key outcomes of the CPRF include:
- at least 90 per cent of CPRF projects are based in rural areas serving isolated communities;
  - while CPRF works directly with communities themselves, it also works closely with key ministries and agencies at national and provincial levels;
  - the CPRF promotes local capacity building and employment. It employs 48 full-time local staff and nearly 100 part-time and casual workers across provinces at rural level. 48 per cent of staff are female;
  - over 85 per cent of technical advice has been provided by Solomon Islanders including gender, youth, community development and specific project implementation technical advice such as road engineers, builders, water supply and sanitation, solar energy, agriculture and livelihood and small business skills; and
  - the highest proportion of CPRF projects have been in education (schools), water and sanitation, health (clinics and posts) followed by community road work, women, youth and agriculture.

## **Solomon Islands government**

- 1.53 The delegation met with the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, the Hon Sir Allan Kemakeza, and senior ministers. It was clear from the meetings that the government of the Solomon Islands is pleased with the support and progress arising from RAMSI.
- 1.54 In particular, the improvements in law and order, and economic management were significant and resulting in positive cultural change. Some of the future challenges relate to the need for more investment in education, infrastructure, and assistance for outlying regions.
- 1.55 A key message was that RAMSI should continue until the job is properly done.

Figure 1.6 Meeting with the Prime Minister the Hon Sir Allan Kemakeza and senior Ministers



## Committee conclusions

- 1.56 The Solomon Islands was a failing Pacific state on any assessment. Lawlessness and rampant gun use was a feature of the community. Failing public institutions, mired by corruption and ineffectiveness, together with a failing economy presented a bleak future for our South Pacific neighbour. Australia, together with a number of other countries, responded effectively and appropriately to the Solomon Islands' request for assistance.
- 1.57 The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) halted the downward spiral of events occurring in the Solomon Islands. The delegation's visit to the Solomon Islands has clearly demonstrated first hand the beneficial and essential work performed by RAMSI. Law and order was quickly established without violence. With law and order under control, RAMSI was soon able to make inroads into improving the government financial framework, accountability, and ensuring that government institutions are more effective in achieving their objectives.

Figure 1.7 Press Conference at Honiara Airport



- 1.58 The delegation was fortunate to meet with a range of representative groups during lunch on the first day of the visit. A number of important topics were discussed during this meeting. In particular, representatives of the National Council of Women discussed the role of women in the reconstruction process and its relationship to outcomes arising from RAMSI. The delegation was advised that women of the Solomon Islands and their representative groups could make a significant contribution to re-building and should be more widely consulted at all stages of reconstruction.
- 1.59 The delegation suggests that if the Australian Government is involved in future assistance missions to countries in the region then it should ensure that all key representative groups are consulted to ensure that the reconstruction process is comprehensive. The delegation notes and applauds AusAID's gender and development policy which focuses on ensuring that women play a critical role in the peace process and the path of reconstruction. However, this was not as clearly demonstrated in the work and priorities of RAMSI during the delegation's visit.
- 1.60 The delegation believes that Australia and the other countries that formed part of RAMSI should be proud of the contribution that they have made to assisting the Solomon Islands. Australia's assistance should continue until representatives of the Solomon Islands Government together with the Australian Government are confident of developments and that there will

be no deterioration in conditions as assistance is slowly reduced. It is possible that Australia's involvement in providing aid and support to the Solomon Island could be a long term commitment of at least 10 years.

- 1.61 The delegation understands that a 12 month review will be undertaken of RAMSI. The delegation will, when this review is completed, consider the findings. At this stage, it is necessary to comment on the overall goal of the mission and the validity of nations such as Australia becoming involved in the internal affairs of other countries.
- 1.62 ASPI, prior to RAMSI, was concerned that the Australian Government might regard engagement in the Solomon Islands as a form of neocolonialism. ASPI, however, argued that there was a growing recognition of the need to intervene in failing states. The delegation supports this broad proposition. Provided that a nation has requested and seeks assistance then Australia and other nations should seek to provide assistance, to the extent possible, to other nations in the region. The Solomon Islands' assistance mission has demonstrated the humanitarian outcomes arising from the mission and, more broadly, positive outcomes for regional and global security.
- 1.63 The delegation is confident that RAMSI has achieved significant outcomes already. This type of comprehensive assistance package, tailored to the needs of individual countries in our region, could be the model for providing future assistance.
- 1.64 Given the success of the assistance mission, the delegation proposes that the Australian Government evaluate the need for a military presence in the Solomon Islands beyond the first half of this year.
- 1.65 It is essential that the Parliament be kept up to date with progress arising from RAMSI. Therefore, the committee recommends that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should provide detailed information about the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in its annual report. In addition, whilst RAMSI remains a critical part of the Solomon Islands recovery, the Minister for Foreign Affairs should make an annual ministerial statement to the House reporting progress with RAMSI.

**Recommendation 1**

- 1.66 **The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should provide detailed information about the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in its annual report. In addition, whilst RAMSI remains a critical part of the Solomon Islands recovery, the Minister for Foreign Affairs should make an annual ministerial statement to the House reporting progress with RAMSI.**

Senator Alan Ferguson  
Chairman  
31 March 2004