

SMALL ARMS IN POST-CONFLICT SITUATION - SOLOMON ISLANDS

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Weapons in Communities - Illegal
Post-Conflict Situations - Case Studies

'International Peace Monitoring Team - Solomon Islands'

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IPMT Role and Function

The International Peace Monitoring Team is an unarmed and neutral organisation that was established at the request of the signatories to the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) to monitor and assist the peace process in the Solomon Islands with particular reference to the provinces of Guadalcanal and Malaita.

The TPA - signed on 15 October 2000 - set out a substantial disarmament and confidence building role for the IPMT.^[i] The parties to the agreement and the contributing governments – Australia and New Zealand – subsequently refined the roles and functions of the IPMT to those of providing support to the Peace Monitoring Council (PMC) in the implementation of the TPA and to:

- Assist with confidence building among the TPA parties and in the wider population
- Monitor and report on breaches of the TPA
- Report to the PMC on developments concerning implementation of the TPA, and, significantly, to
- Receive and monitor the safe custody of arms surrendered in accordance with the Agreement.

The IPMT commenced work in early November 2000. It comprised 47 police, defence and civilian personnel from ministries and agencies in Australia and New Zealand. Currently the IPMT is in its second rotation of Monitors and includes, in addition to personnel from Australia and New Zealand, Monitors from the Cook Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga and Botswana (the latter being a representative nominated by the Commonwealth Secretariat) numbering 48 in total. Many Monitors have experience with small arms issues and in peace-keeping and peace-monitoring operations.

In the six months from November 2000 to April 2001, the IPMT established five Team sites (four in Guadalcanal and one in Malaita) as well as a Headquarters at Henderson near Honiara. With the signing of the Marau Peace Agreement (MPA) on 7 February 2001, IPMT's mandate expanded to include provisions similar to those in the TPA.^[iii]

Confidence building activities commenced immediately as did arrangements for weapons handovers. In their various locations IPMT teams are active in local communities through a regular presence, developing strong linkages to schools, churches, social groups, women's organisations, other NGOs – including those involved in reconciliation strategies – provincial

officials and ex-militants. These teams work in tandem with PMC monitoring posts and with local-level representatives of such organisations as the Church of Melanesia's Brothers and Sisters.

IPMT's leaders participate in workshops and conferences with domestic and multinational agencies and have regular contact and communication with key government agencies. They attend PMC meetings in an observer capacity, provide updates on developments and incidents and participate in discussion.

Disarmament Framework

The parties to the TPA recognised very quickly that the major threat to the stability of their nation was the continued existence of weapons in their communities and, consequently, they gave prominence in the TPA and the MPA to the question of disarmament. In carrying out its mission, the IPMT has given the highest priority to pursuing the disarmament goals set out in the two peace agreements. In prosecuting this aspect of its mandate, the IPMT has:

- Delivered or positioned eight weapons storage containers at seven locations in Guadalcanal and Malaita
- Consulted regularly with key factional representatives, political leaders and ex-commanders with the objective of ensuring the surrender of weapons held by the IFM and MEF
- Encouraged and facilitated weapons handover ceremonies
- Supported the PMC's efforts to promote compliance with the TPA and to develop public opinion in favour of a weapons-free community
- Worked in tandem with PMC Monitors in the field in arranging and receiving weapons, ammunition and explosives from individuals and groups
- Developed numerous community contacts through patrolling to villages and remote regions, attending and arranging community meetings, visiting and speaking at churches and schools, encouraging voluntary surrender of weapons through peer and group pressure, and generally spreading knowledge of the TPA requirements and of the peace process itself.

Weapons Handovers – Modus Operandi

From the outset, arrangements were put in place to ensure the smooth functioning of weapons surrenders and to help the former combatants meet the deadlines of the amnesty provisions of the TPA. Standard Operating Procedures were developed re sighting and checking of weapons, transport, registration, etc. to ensure safety of those involved as well as records for amnesty purposes as well as the consistency and transparency of the process. Cultural ceremonies appropriate to such occasions were organised by ex-militants and community groups.

Some ex-Commanders of the two major groups worked hard to meet the deadlines, but others were less enthusiastic – or less able – to collect weapons from ex-militant comrades and subordinates. Most ex-Commanders were reluctant to surrender their own “personal” weapons.

Handover ceremonies took place at:

Reko (G) on 29 November and 16 December

Kakabona (G) on 14 December

Auki (M) on 15 December

Lambi (G) on 16 December

Tangarare (G) on 16 and 17 December, 2000

Marau (G) on 17 March 2001, and at

Avu'Avu (G) on 27 March 2001.

Although not part of the TPA, disarmament allowances were paid by the Solomon Islands Government to factional leaders and former Commanders soon after these events.

All weapons – modern military/police style, sporting, homemade and “traditional” - have been stored in containers (similar to small shipping containers) at various locations on Guadalcanal and at Auki in Malaita. The containers are padlocked and plastic seals are affixed, the breaking of which would provide evidence of tampering or attempted theft. The containers are inspected at regular intervals by IPMT Monitors accompanied by representatives of militant and community groups. To date (May 2001), not one seal has been tampered with, indicating community trust and respect for the process.

The bulk of the weapons were handed in by the end of year 2000. Since that time weapons have been surrendered on an ad hoc or opportunity basis to IPMT or PMC Monitors, either through spontaneous gestures by citizens, or as patrols engage with villagers in more remote areas.

Weapons Returns

In the six months to end-April 2001, almost 900 weapons have been handed-in to the IPMT. The majority have been hand-made; and by far the largest number have been returned by IFM ex-militants. The majority of those weapons returned were handed in by the end of December 2000: less than 100 guns have been handed in since then.

The IPMT has sought to establish the overall picture of weapons numbers in the Solomon Islands as a guide to the compliance of the former combatants with the weapons surrender provisions of the TPA and as a measure of the continuing threat to peace and national stability from those weapons still outstanding in the community.

The IPMT has been granted access to the main police armoury at the Rove Police Headquarters in Honiara on two occasions (December 2000 and February 2001) to conduct a count of weapons held there. By comparing those figures with previous independent inventories (conducted for the Solomon Islands Government - SIG), with statistics from other police and prison armouries in SI and with the numbers of weapons deposited in the IPMT containers, the conclusion we have reached is that more than 500 high-powered guns remain in the community.

The reasons (and rationalisations) for retention of weapons have been outlined in Sir Peter Kenilorea's paper to this conference. They include: self-defence, as a bargaining chip for better services (or perhaps from a belief that someone might eventually buy them out), from a desire to intimidate and influence political and economic decisions, because of the fact that other groups still retain them, that the amnesty legislation is flawed so why give them up, and (in the case of the police) that retention is necessary to enforce law and order. As a former Supreme Commander has remarked, those holding weapons do so either out of “fear” or out of the “feel” of power that guns give them.

Next Steps?

The slow-down in weapons handovers has been disappointing, but the pace of returns relates to the nature of the conflict, to the interests of the parties involved in it, and to the availability of non-violent alternatives in a post-conflict society. Guns, nonetheless, are still the key issue. Security concerns remain the principal barrier to rehabilitation, reconciliation, investment and

better governance. Much work, therefore, still needs to be done to effect the key disarmament objectives. The government, civil society and other key groups must be drawn more fully into the peace process. Patient constructive engagement and dialogue will be important, as will continuing efforts to build community confidence and to bolster support for voluntary disarmament. IPMT remains ready to work with all parties to that end and in particular to work in support of principal agent for implementing the TPA – the Peace Monitoring Council.

[i] “The Townsville Peace Agreement”, 15 October 2000, Pt II, para 4; and Annexure II.

[ii] “Commitment Between Parties to the Townsville Peace Agreement”, 7 December 2000.

[iii] “The Marau Peace Agreement”, 7 February 2001, para 7.

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