

The End of RAMSI: What has it meant?
Speech by RAMSI Special Coordinator Quinton Devlin
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There's probably a couple of doctoral dissertations in distilling what RAMSI has meant to Solomon Islands, Australia and the region.

Especially when you consider the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands intervention - more commonly known by its acronym RAMSI and sometimes referred to as Operation *Helpem Fren* – involved:

- thousands of police, military, in-line officials, development advisers and diplomats from 15 nations over 14 years;
- a regional investment approaching \$3 billion;
- an operational security component;
- a comprehensive development program;
- over 20 direct Solomon Islands counterpart agencies;
- not to mention some 10 federal Australian agencies.

Still, what is clear is that RAMSI is recognised overwhelming as a genuine success and, as Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Foreign Ministers declared last year, a shining example of regional diplomacy and cooperation.

It put an end to a dire humanitarian situation on Australia's doorstep and reversed the decline of a disintegrating nation that threatened security and stability in the broader Pacific region.

RAMSI halted Solomon Island's descent into lawlessness and towards economic collapse and state failure.

Of course, it wasn't always plain sailing.

RAMSI defended allegations of an emerging parallel state, encroachments on Solomon Islands' sovereignty, heavy-handedness and 'mission creep'.

Frequently these criticisms came from the political class in Solomon Islands,

- which in some quarters resisted RAMSI's suggested good governance and financial reforms,
- and in others, weren't happy that RAMSI was involved in the investigation and arrests of MPs.

Often at the same time, community leaders and some political leaders were arguing that RAMSI was not doing enough to address all the ills of the nation, many of which were beyond RAMSI's mandate.

These irritants contributed to, but equally RAMSI was a victim of, the souring of Australia-Solomon Islands relations in 2006, which led to only limited political buy-on over 2006 and 2007, an increased role for the Pacific

Islands Forum Secretariat and Forum ministers, and a preoccupation during the last 10 years of RAMSI on aligning its programs with the priorities and plans of the Government of the day.

Impressively, however, RAMSI's popularity among Solomon Islanders themselves never wavered. While popular support for RAMSI was being measured (2006-13) it never dropped below 85% and I don't see any evidence that has changed over the last four years.

Very few foreign interventions could make that claim.

The Tensions

Before I go any further, I think it's important to give a quick burst on the conflict that led to the RAMSI intervention and RAMSI's mandate because it is important to understand how far Solomon Islands has come in 14 short years, as well as what RAMSI was tasked to do.

Between 1998 and 2003, for five dark years, the nation was ravaged by lawlessness and ethnic tensions largely between the peoples of the nation's two most populous provinces: Guadalcanal and Malaita.

The Tensions, as they were commonly called, began towards the end of 1998 with the eviction of Malaitan settlers by villagers from the Weathercoast in rural southern Guadalcanal.

The campaign of aggression and intimidation by the evicting group – known later as the Istabu Freedom Movement (IFM) or Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA) – led to the establishment of the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) to protect Malaitan communities, especially in Honiara, and exact retaliation and revenge.

Peace accords before and after the emergence of the Malaita Eagle Force did not hold.

In June 2000, the conflict entered a new phase when Malaitan combatants, with the support of sympathetic police officers, stole high-powered weapons from the police armoury in Honiara and forced the sitting Prime Minister to resign.

The MEF's superior firepower forced Guale commanders to the negotiating table, prompted armed groups to form separately in northwest Solomon Islands, and led to a weak ceasefire.

The ensuing Townsville Peace Agreement hosted by Australia in October 2000 traded amnesties for the surrendering of weapons and dismantling of the militant groups, plus an Australia-led International Peace Monitoring Team.

The Agreement was accepted by both sides, but was rejected by one of the founding Guale commander Harold Keke, who formed the Guadalcanal Liberation Front (GLF) and continued the intimidation.

At the same time, disbanded militants on both sides soon resorted to infighting, armed clashes and uncontrolled criminality.

The ethnicity of the victims became less relevant. Malaitan militants extorted money from the Government that they had helped install.

Guale and Malaitan militants were also deputised as Special Constables and joined the police in violent 'joint operations' that terrorised allegedly sympathetic communities in pursuit of Harold Keke and the GRF.

The underlying causes of the Tensions are complex and many were already evident at the time of the nation's Independence in 1978.

The 2012 Truth and Reconciliation Commission report concluded that the ethnic discontent felt by some Guadalcanal people had been shaped by Solomon Islands' colonial heritage, land issues, illegal settlements, uneven development, government mismanagement, economic crises, weakened traditional authority structures and anaemic law enforcement.

In the end, the conflict killed over 200 people and displaced at least 18,000 Malaitans and thousands more on the island of Guadalcanal fled to the bush or to Honiara.

The human rights situation was grim, with reports of abductions, torture, murder, rape, looting and arson attracting the attention of the international community.

By 2003, the national government and economy was near collapse.

Guns were rampant, law and order was out of control, militants and criminals were committing crimes with impunity and state institutions were simply not functioning or operating at the barest minimum level. The prison officers, for example, had opened the doors of the jail and walked away.

The economy and public finances also experienced a devastating collapse.

GDP had more than halved (62%) over the five years.

The economy was also reeling from extorted payments to ex-militants, political patronage, hundreds of ghost names on the public sector payroll, and damaging customs and tax exemptions.

The Government could not meet its domestic or international debt repayments.

International banks and local businesses alike stopped supplying money and goods to the Government.

Mandate

The situation was calamitous.

Over the five years of conflict, Solomon Islands made several requests for Australian, Commonwealth and UN assistance.

In April 2003, Solomon Islands made another request to Australia.

This time, Australia was in an emboldened foreign policy mood.

Against the backdrop of the shortcomings of the International Peace Monitoring Team, Australia's successful leadership of regional interventions in Bougainville and East Timor, 9/11, the Bali bombings and the Iraq invasion, the Howard Government was willing to help.

It was a time of optimism about the efficacy of state interventions.

Conscious, however, of being perceived as being neo-colonial, Australia insisted on a formal invitation from Solomon Islands, the endorsement of the Pacific Islands Forum and a mission composed from the region.

In addition to altruistic and humanitarian reasons, Australia's leadership and investment in RAMSI was explained in the context of avoiding a 'failing state' in Australia's neighbourhood and the possibility of third parties, including transnational criminals, filling or taking advantage of the void.

This explains why Australia's offer, supported by the region, was a joint package of stabilisation and state-building.

With this approach in mind, Solomon Islands and Forum member states deployed RAMSI under the Biketawa Declaration, an agreement concluded in 2000 that PIF members would act in times of crisis or in response to a member's request.

Solomon Islands and Forum members agreed the key elements of the mandate were to:

- restore civil order *[in Honiara and throughout the rest of the country, including confiscating illegal weapons, investigating and prosecuting criminal offences, strengthening the courts and prison system and protecting key government ministries]*
- stabilise government finances *[including securing revenue collection and controlling expenditure, strengthening financial administrative safeguards and obtaining donor and international financial institutions'*

support]

- promote longer-term economic recovery and revive business confidence [*including implementing economic reform, dealing with corruption and improving debt management]*
- rebuild the machinery of government [*including the functioning of the National Parliament, the Cabinet, the public service and the electoral process.*]

On 24 July 2003, soldiers, police and civilians from 10 nations¹ began to arrive in Honiara by sea and plane.

By 2006, all 15 member states of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) were contributing personnel, and do so today.

RAMSI's arrival marked the end of the conflict in Solomon Islands and the beginning of one of the greatest experiments in regional cooperation.

Never before had the Pacific region stepped in on such a large scale, for such a long period, to help one of its neighbours rebuild itself so completely.

So what has RAMSI meant for Solomon Islands?

Put simply, RAMSI brought stability to the country.

It restored law and order and helped Solomon Islands recover the lost ground and re-build the foundations needed for law enforcement, economic stability and administrative systems from which the nation can continue to grow and to address its development challenges.

History shows us that it normally takes a country around 30 years to recover from civil conflict.

Solomon Islands has come a very long way in 14 short years, but equally its government and people admit openly that there is still plenty more to be done.

Restore law and order

Of course, the most obvious and most celebrated achievement of RAMSI was its ability to restore law and order remarkably quickly.

The might of the Combined military Task Force, which was critical to ensuring a culture of compliance, and the Participating Police Force made it

¹ Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu

very clear that lawlessness would not be tolerated and not a single shot was fired during the first twelve months of the Mission.

In RAMSI's first week, the Government and RAMSI announced a nationwide firearms amnesty.

More than 3,700 guns were collected and destroyed, including police weapons and licensed firearms.

This gave the country an enormous boost of confidence and heralded what one banner at a large peace rally one month later described as a new beginning.

Today, Solomon Islands has a very low crime rate by global standards and one of the lowest rates of gun crime in the world.

In its third week, RAMSI Special Coordinator Nick Warner, and Participating Police Force Commander Ben McDevitt, with the help of mediators, negotiated the surrender of renegade militant commander Harold Keke.

This was crucial as it ended the reign of terror of the Guadalcanal Liberation Front (GLF) and erased any excuses to hold on to weapons.

Many more arrests followed. By the end of its third year, RAMSI had made 6,300 arrests for militant and criminal activity, which represented over 1% of the population and included more than 130 police officers.

These arrests were, similarly, very important to helping build public confidence in the authority of the Government and the rule of law, and start the reconciliation and nation-building process.

It's also important to understand that RAMSI did not restore law and order alone.

It worked with a small but important cadre of peacebuilders and decent and hard-working government employees that were committed to putting their country back on track.

Economy and institutions

To stabilise the country's finances, RAMSI helped re-launch critical public services such as hospitals and schools by ensuring public servants began to receive their salaries again after a hiatus of six fortnightly salary payments.

It also topped up the Government's budget and paid some of Solomon Island's debt to open the doors for development banks and donors to re-engage with the crippled country.

Then began the slow, complex and incremental task of supporting the three arms of government: the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary.

Initially working 'in-line' inside government ministries and later in advisory roles, RAMSI helped increase the Government's tax revenue, improve controls on government spending and detect fraud and mismanagement.

It made it easier to do business in Solomon Islands and unlocked jobs and economic activity by supporting local firms, state-owned enterprises and reforms to competition and foreign investment laws.

After a decade of support, Solomon Islands enjoyed a relatively stable economy that had grown more than 80 percent, was delivering mostly balanced or surplus budgets, modest growth, and the nation's debt had fallen from over 70% of GDP to 12%.

RAMSI also helped restore Solomon Islands' democratic processes. It supported Parliament and Cabinet, election management especially ahead of the 2010 election, and, with only limited success, the inclusion of women in government.

RAMSI helped reform the struggling public service, with Codes of Conduct, performance management systems for heads of ministries and public servants, and more transparent and merit-based recruitment processes.

Improved human resource management systems also detected, for example, hundreds of payments to false identities on the government's payroll.

Law and Justice

As you can imagine, a significant focus of RAMSI's early efforts in the law and justice sector capacity-building was to re-build the police, prisons and courts initially with a view to processing the arrested people (3,400 in first year) and the Tensions-related trials.

It took well over a year for the first trial – the prosecution of renegade militant leader Harold Keke – to begin in early 2005.

A few years later, after the bulk of the Tensions trials had concluded, RAMSI focused on building the broader capacity, sustainability and affordability of the courts and justice sector.

Tackling corruption was another early priority that RAMSI pursued through its support to police investigations and government oversight bodies such as the Office of the Auditor-General, Ombudsman and Leadership Code Commission.

Our broader support to the justice system also supported the long and still ongoing fight against corruption.

Normalisation

The progress made in building the justice sector, machinery of government and economic governance systems was such that regional support could be 'normalised' after 10 years.

In 2013, the military component left and predominantly the Australian Government assumed responsibility for building on RAMSI's support to the lawyers, prosecutors, judges, public solicitors, correctional service officers and leaders of the public service.

Australia and New Zealand also continued bilaterally support to finance, tax and customs managers.

The Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF), however, needed further assistance from RAMSI.

And it took four extra years of RAMSI's support to rebuild the police and public trust in the police to a point where it was possible to end RAMSI's operational policing role and to normalise regional assistance to the RSIPF.

We're now at the point where the need for a 15-nation police assistance mission has also expired.

Security outlook

Given time constraints, rather than painting a sweeping picture of the Solomon Islands, I'd like to focus on the security outlook as this is what people think about most in the context of RAMSI's exit.

And to do this, I'd like to discuss the situation through the eyes of the ordinary Solomon Islanders.

RAMSI has been undertaking extensive community engagement with representatives from the Solomon Islands police, the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Police, National Security and Correctional Services.

We tour the country talking to national and provincial governments, community leaders and groups and ordinary citizens at marketplaces, churches, schools and businesses.

Why are we doing this?

We seek to: address apprehension in some quarters about RAMSI's exit; build public confidence in the police force and urge Solomon Islanders to partner with the police through its new crime prevention model; deter would-be troublemakers from seeing RAMSI's conclusion as an opportunity; and, empower Solomon Islanders to take responsibility for their own future and security.

The feedback, comments and questions from this process have been very revealing.

The overwhelming majority of Solomon Islanders accept that it is time for Solomon Islands to stand on its own two feet and take responsibility for its future.

They accept it is time to normalise the region's support to the police.

They accept that unhealthy dependencies would be created if RAMSI stayed too long.

Almost no one is expressing concern about the integrity of the nation state or the security of their families, although they all agree there are still many issues facing the nation.

I was struck, for example, that during a briefing with most of Honiara's chiefs last month that they were very effusive about RAMSI's contribution to peace and stability and all they spoke about was leveraging RAMSI's exit to embrace the future together.

Most Solomon Islands agree that the police have improved significantly, but the one question we get asked constantly is can we really trust the police.

It is a very understandable question. The police lost the confidence of the people during the Tensions and trust is an easy thing to lose, but a hard thing to earn.

Our answer is "absolutely".

We point to the RSIPF's strong leadership team, strong performance over several years, its focus on crime prevention and discipline, its readiness to be rearmed in a limited fashion, and the increased resourcing from government in recent years.

We point out the police are no longer just recipients of support, but are now training other nations such as Samoa, Vanuatu and Nauru.

We highlight that the RSIPF now contributes to regional disaster relief efforts such as Cyclone Pam and contributes to the United Nations' mission in Darfur.

But we do not sugar-coat it.

We acknowledge the RSIPF is not perfect, but that the test of a good organisation is how it responds to bad behaviour and poor performance, and the senior police executive, currently headed by a Commissioner drawn from the Australian Federal Police, and the RSIPF's professional standards and

internal affairs unit, time and again have demonstrated integrity, transparency and accountability.

Gaining public trust at this juncture is also challenged because, after three years of training from RAMSI, the Government will be rearming a small number of carefully-selected and highly-trained specialist public order management and close personal protections teams with lethal small calibre police firearms.

Given Solomon Island's history of police armoury raids and abuses by armed police officers this complicates the trust equation.

It is also fair to say that most Solomon Islanders accept that RAMSI has achieved its mandate and are reassured by the security support that Australia and New Zealand will continue to provide.

They welcome our assurance that RAMSI wouldn't be leaving if we thought that another Tensions-like incident was on the horizon or that the police were unable to handle the security challenges likely to face the nation.

The business community, particularly the expatriate business community, has also changed its tune in recent years. Today, their intention is to continue to do business in and with Solomon Islands. While some are adopting a 'wait and see' approach, big companies like Huawei, Axiom and Sumitomo are looking to be involved in new large-scale projects.

Post-RAMSI

Solomon Islanders are also heartened by the fact that Australia and New Zealand, in particular, will continue to support the police after RAMSI departs.

One message that resonates is that the Australian and New Zealand police officers and their families will be living in the community, unarmed, sufficiently confident in the security environment to bring their partners and children and entrust the RSIPF to be the protector of law and order.

The other thing that brings comfort is that Australia and Solomon Islands are negotiating a treaty that, in an emergency, would enable Solomon Islands to request help from Australia or an Australia-led coalition of nations, and if Australia agrees, Australia could send or lead a civilian, police or military response to respond to a disaster or security incident that was beyond the capabilities of the Solomon Islands authorities.

Essentially, the treaty is an operational framework that means the legal paperwork will have been already been completed and thus the assistance, which will be determined through the request and response process, can occur quickly.

So what has it meant for Australia and the region?

The successful stabilisation and rebuilding of Solomon Islands has undoubtedly been one of Australia's finest foreign policy achievements in recent decades.

It has made Australia and the region a safer place.

It has also helped cement Australia's leadership in the Pacific and as a security partner of choice.

And, I would argue, that it has therefore helped to give Australia a bigger voice when it comes to talking with the international community about regional and global security.

It has invigorated and reinforced Australia's relationships with our regional neighbours.

RAMSI helped Australia build valuable police, military, diplomatic and civilian links with the region.

It also helped Australia to understand the security apparatus in our neighbouring nations and to build interoperability.

RAMSI also vested Australia with a rich body of expertise on how to plan for, manage and exit from large state-building interventions, and a nuanced understanding of the merits and pitfalls of various courses of action.

It has also reinforced critical lessons from other state-building interventions.

Notably that, even with all the resources and good will in the world, there are limitations on what states can do to help other states address the causes of their insecurity, even while restoring that security.

The rest of the Pacific Islands region have enjoyed similar benefits.

The other nations also learnt new approaches and perspectives working together.

It has struck me, for example, that many members of current police executives around the region were deployed to RAMSI and it seems that their involvement in RAMSI has helped their careers.

RAMSI also demonstrated that the Pacific Islands region is willing and able to act in response to threats to regional security.

It has given our neighbours a better appreciation of what regional security means, and the confidence to see that they can, and should, play a role in maintaining it.

Lessons learned

Every intervention will occur inevitably in a unique set of circumstances, but RAMSI taught us that better security and state-building interventions are:

- . welcomed by the host government and public;
- . a collaborative partnership, with skills transfers and inclusion an early and deliberate focus, particularly for staff in line positions, once the emergency situation stabilises;
- . viewed as providing the nation the time and breathing space to recover the lost ground and address the underlying causes of the conflict, rather than a panacea for all ills;
- . drawn from and endorsed by the region;
- . shaped through consultation and coordination - internally, bilaterally and regionally – over the course of the mission;
- . mandated based on a sound assessment of the challenges and achievable outcomes;
- . established with all key agencies and nations involved jointly in the pre-planning, implementation and reporting;
- . deployed and operated under a clear legal framework;
- . commenced with large numbers and superior firepower if restoring law and order;
- . willing to advocate several ‘game-changing’ policies once normalcy returns;
- . focused on building public trust and confidence in the mission and, as soon as possible, in partnered government agencies;
- . not persuaded to drawdown quickly or look for an early exit strategy; and
- . conscious that it could be an extended (e.g. 15-year) commitment.

Another one that you could add is that resetting and strengthening Westminster systems of government that jar with Melanesian concepts of power and patronage will necessarily be slow, incremental, often challenging and rarely linear.

A couple of less-considered lessons but broader take-aways from the RAMSI story might be:

- the importance of police capacity in the Pacific. With only three fully-fledged militaries in the region (PNG, Fiji and Tonga), policing is an

important component of the stability equation and worthy of a strong or at least deliberate focus in development programs in the Pacific

- the criticality of Pacific Islanders (Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia) to the forging of Pacific-style solutions for Pacific-style problems. PICs provide useful yardsticks and a different voice that adds credibility to messaging and permits tougher messages to be conveyed.
- The People's Surveys (2006-13) helped Solomon Islands governments to be more open to criticism, to re-think public service delivery, and created space for a growing civil society.

Finally, let me conclude by saying that RAMSI will be rightly hailed a success when it concludes in June this year.

It has done as much as it could in the circumstances and we shouldn't be shy about looking closely at what worked and didn't work, and drawing on those lessons if there is ever a need for regional cooperation on a security and/or state re-building exercise.

Nor should we be shy about celebrating RAMSI's success and achievements.