

The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands

BY ANDREW LEITH

The purpose of this article is not to provide a critical analysis of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) or a robust platform for lessons learned. Rather, it offers a general introduction to the country and an overview of a stabilization and reconstruction operation with a different framework than many of the operations that the United States has participated in during the post–Cold War period. RAMSI is an Australian-led intervention that deployed to the Solomon Islands in July 2003 to establish peace and security. Unlike the Australian-led Peace Monitoring Group, which deployed to Bougainville from May 1998 to June 2003,¹ and the ongoing commitment to East Timor,² RAMSI is led by a diplomat. It emphasizes policing and a “light” military presence.

One could argue that the lessons learned from recent interventions in fragile and conflict-affected countries such as the Solomon Islands are more relevant to future U.S. commitments than the plethora of lessons learned templates and volumes of doctrine that are being pieced together from the Afghanistan and Iraq experiences.

The Solomon Islands is the third largest archipelago in the South Pacific consisting of a scattered double chain of 992 islands extending 1,000 miles southeast from Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. With a population of approximately 560,000, the country has a diverse cultural mix across

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the nine provinces: Choiseul, Malaita, Western, Temotu, Central, Rennell and Bellona, Makira-Ulawa, Isabel, and Guadalcanal, where the capital city Honiara, governed separately as a capital territory, is located. Melanesians make up over 90 percent of the population, but there are substantial numbers of Polynesians, Micronesians, Chinese, and Europeans. Within the Melanesian group, there is an array of languages, clans, and tribal affiliations, which are made even more complex by the *wantok* system of obligation based on the same language group. It is a country renown for its remoteness, beautiful coral islands, and Melanesian hospitality, but apart from Honiara and the provincial centers, the archipelago has not changed much since the 1st Marine Division landed on Guadalcanal in August 1942.

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However, the history of the Solomon Islands post-independence in July 1978 has been short and troubled. The violence that erupted in early 1998 was fueled by tensions in Guadalcanal where traditional landowners resented the immigrants from Malaita who had begun to settle lands as part of an urban drift toward better employment opportunities in Honiara. The Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army began to terrorize and kill rural Malaitans who were then forced to flee to Honiara or back to their home island. The Malaita Eagle Force was subsequently formed to protect the interests of the

Malaitans; violence escalated, causing several hundred deaths. In October 2000, mediations by Australia and New Zealand resulted in the Townsville Peace Agreement signing with a general amnesty and disarmament of both factions agreed upon. By this stage, general lawlessness and violence had spread to other provinces, resulting in the collapse of an already fragile government and economy. Regionally, there was a general fear that the Solomon Islands could become a failed state, which for Australia was a strategic nightmare, given that within the “arch of instability” to its northeast, the events in East Timor were still unfolding and the Peace Monitoring Group was in the midst of concluding ceasefire-monitoring activities in Bougainville.

At the request of the government of the Solomon Islands, RAMSI was deployed in July 2003 to assist in the establishment of peace and security through support for law and justice, democratic governance, and economic growth. Unlike the commitments to Bougainville and East Timor, RAMSI was led by a diplomat sourced from within the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs. From the onset, there was a strong emphasis on policing with a light military footprint provided mainly by the Australian Defence Force,³ which soon restored law and order. There were 15 contributing countries involved, including personnel from the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Federal Police, Customs and Border Services, Finance, Treasury, and the Australian Defence Force. One of the key lessons learned from the initial RAMSI deployment is that it functioned effectively without the usual hurdles that normally plague the multiagency process and the first months of any operation.



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Access to clean water reduces poverty and is a fundamental requirement for economic development

The ability to bridge what could have become the usual flight to the budgetary and regulatory security of organizational stovepipes is due in part to the fact that Australia had already developed a wealth of experience in the practical integration of development and security agencies. The caliber of personnel selected to deploy, individual relationships, and interagency networks established in Bougainville and East Timor certainly contributed to the initial successes, but much can be attributed to the 6 weeks prior to deployment where all key stakeholders discussed, workshopped, developed strategies, and defined roles structured around three phases: restoring security, restoring governance, and capacity-building.⁴ This was followed up on the ground by the establishment of a single internal reporting system, twice-daily coordination meetings for senior agency representatives,

external communications undertaken as a multiagency product, and coherent and cohesive support provided at the departmental and cabinet levels back in Canberra.

Since its establishment, RAMSI has made considerable efforts to work with the government of the Solomon Islands to improve the country's rule of law, machinery of government, and problem of urban drift driven by a youth bulge seeking better employment opportunities that eventually leads to the breakdown of infrastructure and traditional and community values. AusAID and the New Zealand Aid Programme have also worked hard to improve the fragile education and health care sectors—no different from the kaleidoscope of cultural, economic, and infrastructure problems that confronts most fragile and postconflict countries. Arguably, one of the reasons RAMSI

was able to function effectively from the onset was that the British colonial system left behind a Westminster-style bureaucracy, a judicial system based on English Common Law, and links to the Commonwealth. Thus, unlike many other recent interventions—where there has been a *terra nullis* approach and an egregious assumption that all things having to do with governance must be recreated in the image of “our own democratic institutions”—in the Solomon Islands, the majority of RAMSI staff who are sourced from Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific were able to commence work within a framework that they and their counterparts accepted as

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functional. Another legacy of the country’s colonial past is that English is the official language, which makes it much easier to conduct business both regionally and internationally and for those tasked with capacity-building to interface with their counterparts. While many less educated Solomon Islanders are not able to converse in the Queen’s English, most of them do speak or understand the Creole version called Pijin.

Over the next 3 years, there was a general belief among Solomon Islanders that life had been normalized after the ethnic tensions; however, the controversial elections in April 2006 saw the situation in Honiara rapidly deteriorate. Many believed that Snyder Rini

had been able to gain power as the prime minister through funding provided by the Chinese business community. Despite the presence of RAMSI’s security forces, the appointment of Rini resulted in 2 days of anarchy and rioting, with Chinatown and the Pacific Casino Hotel burned to the ground. Australia’s response was to reinforce RAMSI, which quickly stabilized the security situation. Moreover, a no-confidence vote resulted in the resignation of Rini. The subsequent appointment of Manasseh Sogavare as prime minister brought calm to the capital and enabled RAMSI to continue with its mission.

Since April 2006, there have been a number of no-confidence votes and a general election in August 2010, and although tensions do occasionally bubble to the surface, most stakeholders appear committed to reconciling and maintaining peace across the archipelago. However, there are also a number of unresolved political, economic, and social issues that need to be addressed by the government of the Solomon Islands. Particularly with the drawdown of the RAMSI commitment scheduled to commence in mid-2012, it is not too difficult to envisage a country once again crippled by corruption and nepotism—with the inevitable outcome being a return to chaos.

Despite these concerns, the RAMSI mission has changed little since 2003 with the focus remaining on “helping the Solomon Islands to lay the foundations for long-term stability, security and prosperity—through support for improved law, justice and security; for more effective, accountable and democratic government; for stronger, broad-based economic growth.”⁵ In an effort to ensure that this translates into sustainable and realistic objectives for the country post-RAMSI, the

2009 Solomon Islands Government–RAMSI Partnership Framework was designed to provide objectives and targets for RAMSI’s work in the Solomon Islands, with indicative time-frames linked to each objective. A number of these objectives have already been met, and the timeline for others has been adjusted as required by RAMSI’s Performance Oversight Group in consultation with the Government’s Forum Ministerial Standing Committee on RAMSI. However, other endemic problems created by corruption and government inertia have a huge impact on long-term objectives of RAMSI.

Support for Improved Law, Justice, and Security

In the short term, the goal of a “secure, safe, ordered and just Solomon Islands society where laws are administered fairly regardless of position or status giving due recognition to traditional values and customs” has been achieved. At the policing level, there has been considerable effort by RAMSI’s Participating Police Force to capacity-build and subsequently audit the effectiveness of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF). However, efforts to implement a community policing program across the archipelago have not been successful mainly due to a lack of funding and an inability to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of unsworn community constables. When no official rule of law is present in the more remote areas, arbitration traditionally falls to the community and village chiefs, and most issues are resolved more than satisfactorily—much to the chagrin of the policymakers in Honiara.

Unlike the 18,000 or so law enforcement agencies that support the criminal justice, courts, and corrections systems in the United States, Australia has only seven state and territorial police forces and one federal entity

tasked with enforcing the criminal law of the Commonwealth of Australia. Within the Australian Federal Police (AFP), there exists the International Deployment Group (IDG), which has a long tradition of involvement in international peacekeeping, policing, and capacity development in countries ranging from Cyprus to Somalia. The IDG has the capacity to provide officers for the Australian government’s domestic and international stability and security operations and currently has an approved 1,200-strong staff. Within the IDG, there also exists the *Operations Response Group*, which provides highly skilled tactical policing capability for rapid deployment to unstable domestic and international operational situations. For personnel deploying in support of RAMSI, a 2-week predeployment course is conducted at the IDG facility just outside of Canberra for sworn and unsworn AFP members, state and territory police officers, and members of Pacific Island nation police services. RAMSI has drawn heavily on the IDG and its role in supporting the RSIPF to provide security in the Solomon Islands rather than the military components of the Combined Task Force.

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One of the criticisms of the existing policing system is that RSIPF personnel are not armed and are perceived by many to provide little more than local traffic control and limited community policing. The heavy lifting is still being undertaken by members of the IDG-staffed Participating Police Force, and

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although transitional strategies are in place to assist the RSIPF in independently carrying out its mandated functions of maintaining law and order and targeting corrupt conduct in the Solomon Islands, there is some skepticism that once RASMI departs, the RSIPF will have the adequate training, logistics, communications, and budget to carry out its functions across the country's vast and diverse archipelago. The inability of the RSIPF to quell the riots in Chinatown in April 2006 did little to allay these fears.

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In terms of law and justice, RAMSI advisors and donors have worked hard to ensure that the Solomon Islands' judicial and correctional systems are functional and provide a strong, fair, and efficient system of justice. Challenges still facing the program are poor resourcing of the legal sector, inability to recruit and retain qualified legal staff, lack of engagement with traditional justice systems, and outsourcing much of the daily work to international staff rather than their Solomon Islander counterparts. Public trust and confidence in the country's judicial system has also been undermined by the decision of a hastily convened parole board in January 2011 to release the former Fisheries minister from prison after only serving 1 month of a 33-month sentence on charges of unlawfully wounding a person and assaulting a police officer in 2001 while he was a member of the Malaita Eagle Force.

Stronger, Broad-based Economic Growth

According to Paul Collier, former director of the World Bank's Development Research Group and author of *The Bottom Billion*, post-conflict countries with low income per capita have a 40 percent chance of returning to conflict within 10 years.⁶ With the average daily income per capita being around US \$3, there is some cause for concern, particularly as most of the wealth is centered in and around Honiara. The country faces a number of hurdles, including steep infrastructure and service provision costs, fractured internal markets, limited employment opportunities, undeveloped human capital, and vulnerability of the infrastructure to natural hazards such as cyclones, earthquakes, and tsunamis. The inability of the judicial system to effectively arbitrate traditional land disputes also deters both donors and foreign direct investment.

Since the end of the civil unrest in 2003, the economy has been driven by large increases in international aid and a rapid expansion of the forestry sector. However, stocks of natural forest are nearing exhaustion, and donor fatigue is likely to set in sooner rather than later. Without a commitment from the government of the Solomon Islands toward regulatory and economic policy reform, it is unlikely that living standards will improve. Moreover, there will probably not be opportunities for further domestic and international investment. The October 2010 World Bank Report on Solomon Islands Growth Prospects identifies a number of opportunities for growth, including a vibrant smallholder agricultural sector; tourism; natural resources such as gold and nickel; an international mobile workforce; and international

Reliable sanitation infrastructure is essential for improving public health, building communities, and strengthening regional stability



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partnerships.⁷ Without political support for such policies, it is more than likely that Collier's prophecy will come true.

More Effective, Accountable, and Democratic Government

In Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index, the Solomon Islands ranked 110 out of 178 countries, and on a scale from 10 (highly clean) to 0 (highly corrupt) was rated as 2.8 with much of the culture of corruption and cronyism directly attributed to the electoral and political process. In the national general elections conducted in August 2010, a record total of 508 candidates vied for 50 seats in parliament, with considerable time, effort, finances, resources, and allegedly donor funding used to obtain votes. A system of patronage is established through methods ranging from the provision of water tanks in a village to the reliance on the *wantok* system and assurances of future gain once a candidate is elected. The majority of candidates have no party affiliation, and without a national political platform, campaigns are conducted on promises of individual, village, and district sponsorship when the candidate gains power. Once 50 candidates are elected, several camps begin to form in the leading hotels in and around Honiara, where the stronger and more affluent cajole, bribe, or seduce others into joining their organization to form a majority.

Weak political parties and highly unstable parliamentary coalitions have traditionally characterized governments in the Solomon Islands. Each ministry is headed by a cabinet member, who is assisted by a permanent secretary, a career public servant. They are subject to frequent votes of no confidence, and government leadership changes often as a result. With a budgetary process that has little accountability, cabinet members essentially become project managers rather than policymakers, with the majority of their time spent allocating finances and resources to their *wantok*, fulfilling campaign promises, and maintaining political coalitions. For many Solomon Islanders in the more remote provinces and districts, this system of patronage is far more preferable than receiving no governmental support at all, and it is no wonder that despite the best efforts of RAMSI and many of the competent and dedicated senior bureaucrats within the government, the life of the average Solomon Islander has improved only marginally since 2003.

Conclusion

The old adage that "you can dress up a pig in a silk robe, but it's still a pig" can certainly be applied to the Solomon Islands, where no matter how much effort RAMSI, nongovernmental organizations, international organizations, and donors put into laying the foundations for long-term stability, security, and prosperity, little will be achieved in the country until the electoral process and culture of political corruption, nepotism, and cronyism are no longer acceptable to the Solomon Islanders themselves. Until then, the country will always teeter on the brink of becoming a failed state. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Opposition to mining development at the Panguna mine in Papua New Guinea's North Solomons Province led to the emergence of a secessionist movement on Bougainville in the late 1960s. By 1988, the

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simmering anger of a group of militant landowners erupted in a campaign of sabotage and harassment of mine employees, which led to bloodshed, riots, and the introduction of Papua New Guinea Defence Force personnel to maintain law and order. Although a ceasefire was negotiated with the Bougainville Revolutionary Army in 1990, the situation remained unresolved until December 1997, when New Zealand established the Truce Monitoring Group. Following an agreement on a permanent ceasefire in April 1998, the government of Papua New Guinea invited Australia to lead the Peace Monitoring Group (PMG). The mission of the unarmed PMG was to conduct ceasefire monitoring activities, coordinate a weapons disposal program, and disseminate information about the peace process. The PMG was led by the Australian Defence Force and consisted of personnel from New Zealand, Fiji, and Vanuatu with support provided by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, Australian Agency for International Development, and Australian Federal Police. In accordance with the Bougainville Peace Agreement, the PMG was withdrawn in June 2003, and elections for the first Autonomous Bougainville Government were conducted in May and June 2005.

² Following the widespread post-ballot violence and destruction of East Timor in 1999, Australia organized and led the United Nations–authorized International Force in East Timor (INTERFET), which was mandated to help restore peace and order and facilitate humanitarian assistance. Regional contributions were provided by Fiji, Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, the Philippines, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Thailand, Kenya, Canada, and the United States. (Although small in size, the U.S. Support Group East Timor did a sterling job coordinating infrastructure repair and humanitarian assistance, including dental and medical care for tens of thousands of East Timorese.) Following the withdrawal of the Indonesian military forces in October 1999 and the subsequent disbanding of militia groups, INTERFET handed over military operations to the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) in February 2000. UNTAET was an integrated civil-military mission mandated to maintain security and prepare the country for national elections and independence, which was achieved in May 2002. Political unrest caused by a nepotistic and dysfunctional government led to unrest in the capital, Dili, in April–May 2006. At the request of the government of East Timor, Australia deployed an International Stabilisation Force (ISF) consisting of military and police contingents from New Zealand, Portugal, and Malaysia to restore security. Australia and New Zealand continue to support a reduced ISF, which works with the United Nations Integrated Mission in East Timor to support the government in “consolidating stability, enhancing a culture of democratic governance, and facilitating political dialogue among Timorese stakeholders.”

³ Combined Task Force 635 is an infantry company commanded by an Australian army lieutenant colonel. Although the Australian army provides the largest contingent composed mainly of reservists on 4-month rotations, the task force also includes personnel from the New Zealand Defence Force, Papua New Guinea Defence Force, Republic of Fiji Military Forces, and Tonga Defence Services. It has a rapid response capability with the specific role of providing a stable environment to assist the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force to conduct policing duties. As was the case in April 2006, the Australian Defence Force has the capacity to deploy personnel at short notice from the 3^d Infantry Brigade in Townsville, Queensland, about a 3-hour flight from Honiara.

⁴ Karene Melloul, *Accidental Partners? Listening to the Australian Defence and Police Experience of the Security-Development Nexus in Conflict-Affected and Fragile States*, World Bank Fragile and Conflict-Affected Countries Group Working Paper, October 2010.

⁵ See Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, “What Is RAMSI?” available at <www.ramsi.org/about/what-is-ramsi.html>.

⁶ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (London: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

⁷ Solomon Islands Growth Prospects, Constraints and Policy Priorities, World Bank Discussion Note, October 2010.