



WORKSHOP PAPER

An Australian Government Perspective

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Thank you for inviting me here today to talk about the situation in Solomon Islands, the Australian Government's perspective on what has occurred and its implications for our engagement there.

The situation is obviously still very fluid, and these are very preliminary thoughts, which is why I am speaking only for Australia at this stage, and not for the other contributing members of RAMSI.

Firstly, let me offer a brief update on the situation on the ground as we understand it. Manasseh Sogavare has been elected Prime Minister. His election seems to have been received calmly thus far. He has yet to announce his Cabinet, but details are expected to emerge over the weekend. In his acceptance speech he noted that he would ensure responsible government for the country. This comment was welcomed. In addition, he has indicated to the media that he thinks RAMSI should remain in Solomon Islands, and that he will work with RAMSI. He has previously said he would like to review RAMSI's direction, and we of course know that he has been a critic of RAMSI in the past.

So let me take up this point, before going into more general discussion. We welcome Mr Sogavare's comments, and we look forward to engaging with the new Prime Minister to learn his priorities and to take RAMSI forward. As far as we are concerned, RAMSI is under constant review, including now through a number of formal mechanisms, and we welcome the new government's interest in engaging in this process.

This would have been our position, no matter who was elected. As we have said on a number of occasions recently, RAMSI is a partnership with the Solomon Islands Government - whichever Government is elected by the democratic and parliamentary processes of Solomon Islands.

RAMSI came about at the invitation of the Solomon Islands Government, and has its legal foundation in an Act of the Solomon Islands Parliament, which was passed unanimously in 2003. There is therefore no question but that we would work with the elected government. We have no other choice if we wish to support the notion of democracy in Solomon Islands.

We recognise that the political processes are open to abuse and that corruption is a huge problem in Solomon Islands, including, and perhaps especially, within the political system. That is why, through RAMSI, we have focused on trying to rebuild and strengthen the accountability institutions – the Leadership Code Commission, the Ombudsman's Office and the Auditor-General's Office.

In time, the hope is that these institutions will be strong enough to inspire faith in them, so that people will actually use them to report allegations of corruption and allow them to be investigated and dealt with in the courts. At present, while everyone is willing to talk about what this or that politician may have done, who they may have taken money from and who they may be giving money to, very few people are willing to put their name to that talk in an official report.

Some people are willing to come forward, and as a result a number of politicians, including Ministers, and senior public servants have been arrested and charged with corruption offences over the past two and half years. But, in relation to the recent election, police advise that they have not at this stage received any official report of corruption. Building trust, and making a democracy work, take time.

Australia, New Zealand, and the other countries of the region have committed to Solomon Islands for the long-term. In Australia's case, not only do we have an unusual four year budget pledge - beyond the life of our own government and with bipartisan support - but our Prime Minister said publicly in 2003 that we would need to be fully committed to the task for at least ten years.

Recent events have not altered that long-term commitment. If anything, they have underlined the need for it, and reinforced the message that we have been putting forward since the beginning of RAMSI – that the changes needed in Solomon Islands, to ensure future prosperity, security and stability, will take many years, if not generations, to implement and embed.

RAMSI, after all, has only been in Solomon Islands for two years and nine months. In that time, significant progress has been made on a number of fronts.

When RAMSI arrived in Solomon Islands in 2003, the problems faced by the country were immense. Although outright ethnic warfare had ceased, opportunistic criminal lawlessness was rife, the police force was so compromised by its links to former militants and criminal gangs that it was unable to keep the peace, corruption was widespread - remissions and illegal licences meant much government revenue was never collected - and that which did come in, mainly in the form of tax payments from the commercial banks, was immediately extorted at gun point by ex-militants and Special Constables and anyone else with a big enough gun. As a result, service delivery had faltered – nothing had flowed out to the provinces for some time, public officers, including teachers and nurses weren't being paid, and by 2003, even the compensation money, that had kept at least the beer and mag wheel sections of the Honiara economy afloat, had dried up. Along with the collapse of the economy was a total collapse in public confidence in all the institutions of state.

So, when Australia, New Zealand and the other Pacific Islands countries agreed to respond to the Solomon Islands Government's request for help with the law and order situation in 2003, we made it very clear that we were going to offer a package of assistance. It would not be enough to provide security, just as it had proven not to be enough to focus on basic service delivery or institutional strengthening in the context of such profound decline. If RAMSI was going to be successful, it would need to tackle a broad spectrum of problems, including the ones that could not be solved overnight, and including those that were politically difficult. This position has not changed, and it is one we will be reinforcing strongly with the new Government.

Although RAMSI was always an integrated approach, there is no doubt that the first priority on arrival was the restoration of the rule of law. It is fair to say initial success in this regard - in relation to the arrest of militants, and the removal of a large number of firearms from the community - was quicker and more significant than had been anticipated. There was also considerable early success in stabilising government

finances. From the beginning, we made a concerted effort to reiterate that the real challenges were only just beginning and would take time and commitment. But, understandably, progress after that initial period has seemed slow in comparison.

So before we look specifically at the implications of the recent riots, which have clearly had damaging effects in many areas, I want to highlight for a moment the progress made by the RAMSI partnership which has not been undermined and which is still of value. I think it is important that we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Let's focus first on the area that may seem at a glance to have suffered the most significant setback – police, law and order. Apart from the arrest of large numbers of law-breakers (the incredible number of 6,300 on more than 9,100 charges), successful support to the judicial system (which has enabled those arrested to be dealt with by an effective and impartial judiciary), and the removal of over 3,600 firearms from the community (which no doubt contributed to the fact that no lives were lost in the recent unrest), the progress made since RAMSI's arrival in July 2003 on re-building the RSIP as a vital national institution can not be discounted.

After a wholesale clean-out of the police force - over 160 former RSIP officers arrested and others removed through internal investigations – rebuilding has obviously been a mammoth task. Four rounds of new recruits – men and women from all provinces - have completed training at the RSIP Police Academy at Rove and commenced policing duties. According to the Police Commissioner, these new recruits and junior RSIP officers performed very well in combating the recent riots.

There is a long way to go, of course, but the progress in this area is what underlies the return to the rule of law which has occurred in Solomon Islands. What that means practically is that when security is undermined, and when people break the law, as occurred two weeks ago, order can be restored, and people can be arrested. It is true that widespread damage occurred before the situation was brought under control, and that reinforcements had to be called in from Australia, New Zealand and the region, but that tells us two things – firstly, that a riot is not an easy thing to control (even the Paris Riot Police, with all their experience, find it a challenge), and secondly that the work on rebuilding the Solomon Islands police must be continued. The fact that two weeks after the riots Honiara is calm and more than 150 people have been arrested for their activities during the unrest, tells us we have come a long way since 2003.

In RAMSI's two other main areas of work, economic governance and machinery of government, we can also point to significant progress that has not been undermined. The Government's improved financial position and financial management means, among other things, that service delivery continues, public servant salaries are paid on time, and essential economic reform is underway. The bureaucracy is functioning far more effectively than it was, with improved communication and coordination between different parts of government, better planning and management systems, and improved understanding and implementation of processes and, importantly, recruitment and human resource development. With RAMSI support, the Institute for Public Administration and Management has been re-established, and public servants have received the first training they have undertaken in many years.

It is important for us not to lose sight of this progress. But I don't want to give the impression that we are complacent, or that we intend to ignore the implications of riots. What has occurred clearly represents a significant setback for Solomon Islands. It is a setback in terms of the physical damage that has been caused (which has affected not only Chinese business people, but also the many ethnic Solomon Islanders who were employed by those businesses, estimated to have been 600 at the Pacific Casino Hotel alone) and also in terms of the damage to the international image of Solomon Islands (which has implications for tourism and foreign investment). More far-reaching, the riots have been a setback to the process of peace and reconciliation in the country, and to people's sense of well-being and security.

Australia, as the lead country in RAMSI, is very focused on examining what the unrest can tell us which can inform our approach. This process has only just begun, and what I have to offer are some very preliminary thoughts.

The first obvious lesson we draw is that our job is a long way from being done, and we need to stay committed. We will therefore be working hard to engage with the incoming government, and ensure its commitment to forward partnership. Our partners in the region have already re-affirmed their support for RAMSI both publicly and privately.

Secondly, we are already reflecting, in our many internal consultative mechanisms, on the reasons for the unrest and what it tells us about the needs of Solomon Islands society.

In fact, it tells us a lot that we already know. First and foremost that the situation in Solomon Islands remains fragile – as the literature says “a post-conflict society is a pre-conflict society.”

Much analysis remains to be done, and is being done by many people, on the factors which provoked this unrest. At this early stage, let me offer a nutshell take on what has occurred - in very simplistic terms – from which some initial thoughts can be drawn. One possible explanation is that a small criminal element, frustrated that increasing adherence to the rule of law has curtailed its interests, has preyed on and used to its own ends what are very genuinely felt, deep-seated resentments within the population – partly of corruption and mismanagement, partly a feeling that the politicians have been taking the people for a ride, partly of perceived Chinese interference in politics and, most significantly, resentment of Chinese commercial success and a feeling that it has been at the expense of Solomon Islanders' prosperity. All of these resentments fed into a ransacking mass element, stirred up by those with less worthy political motives than the elimination of corruption or wanting the bad guys out of government, and it all got out of hand.

This tells us a few things. Obviously, despite the fact that things clearly have improved since the bad old days, people do not feel they are getting their fair share of the benefits. They feel that others – politicians, Chinese business people, maybe foreign advisers – are taking more than their share, and they do not have faith in their political system, and specifically in their politicians' ability to elect a good Prime Minister.

And what does this tell us? Perhaps that more work needs to be done in some key areas:

- on building a sense of unity and nationhood, and on reconciliation
- on addressing the problems of corruption and lack of transparency in government
- on improving people's understanding of and ability to participate in the democratic process
- and on generating economic development and creating opportunities for young people in Solomon Islands.

Mr Downer, during his recent visit to Honiara, urged both sides of politics to step up and take responsibility for tackling these issues. These problems cannot be solved by outsiders alone. But clearly, RAMSI has an interest in doing what we can to help address these issues, if we are to ensure that the progress RAMSI has made to date is sustainable.

None of this is new. We have all been discussing the need to address the underlying causes of conflict in Solomon Islands for some time. But quick fixes have not been easy to find. RAMSI is already working – through the civic education and parliamentary strengthening projects, through work on strengthening the accountability institutions and improving governance, and through the various arms of the finance project – on addressing these deep-seated problems. But everything we are doing takes time – education takes time, building trust takes time, instilling good practices takes time. Clearly, if people do not sense that enough progress is being made in these areas, there is a risk that they will take matters into their own hands, with disastrous results.

So we think we probably have to do more in these areas in an attempt to increase the pace of change and satisfy public expectations. Although we have been focused over the past two weeks on the task of again restoring order, we have already begun the process within the Australian Government and in discussion with New Zealand, of creative thinking with a view to presenting some concrete proposals to the new government as soon as possible. This process will be taken forward in discussion with our regional partners.