



WORKSHOP PAPER

RAMSI: The Challenges Ahead

*** Mary Louise O'Callaghan**

This paper was presented at the Workshop *Solomon Islands: Where to now?* Held on Friday, 5th May 2006. The Workshop was organised by State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project and The Pacific Centre, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, and financially supported by AusAID

***Mary Louise O'Callaghan** is a Commentator and long term resident in the Solomon Islands

It would seem no small coincidence that the first congratulatory-cab off the rank to Solomon Islands new prime minister came on the day of his election from the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Just four hours after Manasseh Sogavare had secured one of the most arduous jobs in the region, RAMSI Special Co-ordinator, James Batley - who arguably holds down a post almost as challenging - dispatched his congratulations to the man with whom he must now attempt to forge an open and trusting partnership if RAMSI in its current form is to survive.

In reality Batley and the Howard Government have no choice; if they wish to pursue the grand vision of RAMSI - and it is grand; no less than to assist Solomon Islanders to rebuild and reshape their nation into a viable, modern state that can be ruled and run effectively by its own people - they need not only the co-operation of but a working and meaningful partnership with the government of the day whoever that maybe. And even if that government is headed, as it is today, by a politician who has catapulted himself into office once on the back of a coup in 2000 and now, the second time around, on the rebound from the violent social unrest that razed Honiara's China Town in April 2006.

In reality, nor do Solomon Islanders have any other real option. Most already know, from the four agonising years 1999 – 2003, just how bad it can get. While the majority of Solomon Islanders did not join in the ethnic tensions, as they were called between the two largest islands of Guadalcanal and Malaita, they were forced to watch nevertheless in distress and disbelief as any semblance of governance steadily crumbled under the weight of the guns and the criminals wielding them. Most also remain to this day uncomprehending of how their nearest and most powerful neighbour, Australia could sit on its hands for as long as it did. They also do not necessarily know or understand that when along came September 11, and then the Bali Bombing there followed in the Howard Government a recognition that in the new world order ushered in by international terrorism, the stability or lack of it in our small island neighbours could potentially effect Australia's security. It was in the first flush of this newly discovered imperative for neighbourly concern that the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands was born. Arriving in the smoky dawn of 24 July 2003, it quickly wrought the miracle –the return of law and order and financial stability - that Solomon Islanders had all been praying for, literally.

In the almost three years that have passed since then there have been great gains but despite a lot of hard work, the Solomons is far from free from the legacy of these dark days of neglect and by the very fact of its existence nor therefore is RAMSI. So in many ways many of the challenges that RAMSI faces are a product of the challenges that so daunt the Solomons future prospects (although RAMSI also has a separate set of challenges all of its own which will also be discussed in this paper). Even before Solomon Islands economic prospects were dealt the devastating blow of the Easter Tuesday torching of China Town, the Solomons economy had suffered so badly over the previous decade that it is now estimated that if an impossible annual growth rate of 5 per cent could somehow be sustained for the next 20 years this would still only hike the standard of living for the fastest growing population in the region back to where they were hovering in 1994. Add to this the growing social problems that accompany a nation's declining capacity to look after itself and the deep seated and as yet largely unresolved issues that lay behind the nation's years of strife and there is still a very, very long way to go before Solomon Islanders will be able to wrest control of their destiny.

A key to turning any of this around is the requirement for rapid change in how the country is attempting to fund, run and develop itself. This is a big ask anywhere but more so in a country where even the institutions bequeathed 30 years ago in the lead up to Independence are still not clearly understood by most! Nor are these institutions without the need for reform and refinement themselves. RAMSI has in fact in the past year put enormous resources into doing something about this fundamental lack of knowledge by Solomon Islanders of how their nation was intended to work through a massive and expensive nationwide Civic Education Project but it is literally a race against time.

This is also the case for RAMSI's innovative programs funded by AusAID to enhance rural livelihoods and develop provincial economies and infrastructure for the 85 per cent of the Solomons population living in non-urban areas. The very basic aim of these is to try to put \$100 a month into the pocket of every family in rural Solomon Islands; to move something of the quite active informal economy into the formal sector in time to cushion the nation from the impact of shrinking forestry revenues as the Solomons ancient trees – once a sustainable resource – are finally exhausted in the next five to seven years.

But at the heart of RAMSI's efforts to assist with the restoration of governance and the institutions of state is a program of ambitious economic, legislative, public sector and electoral reforms that are in various stages of design or implementation.

And it is here we start to see the rub of RAMSI. In stark contrast to the overwhelming support for the mission's quite extensive intervention into Solomons law and order, there has been right from the start resentment, suspicion and active undermining of the RAMSI reforms and in particular the policy of putting key RAMSI personnel within ministries such as finance and in line positions such as the accountant general ditto the efforts to reform government practices, policies and the endemic corruption that so undermines much of the state's core business in Solomon Islands, particularly the delivery of services. That is resentment, suspicion and active undermining by the country's political and bureaucratic elite.

This daily, endless and time consuming struggle to push forward on with these reforms with little or no support from all but a few of Solomons' senior bureaucrats was described by one RAMSI insider recently as 'trench warfare' which does raise the question of whether, if it is that hard, is it in fact counter-productive to continue doggedly in such a hand over fist fashion? Which raises another question of whether anyone in Canberra, Honiara, Wellington or even Suva is even stopping to ask this question and considering the implications of not persisting with the grand RAMSI reform plans?

RAMSI for its part has moved in the last year in a very real way to meet the concerns of the Solomon Islands Government that it was setting an agenda for these reforms and other RAMSI funded government programs with little or no consultation or mechanism of accountability other than the agreement of the incumbent Solomon Islands Prime Minister, regular reporting back to Canberra and Wellington and the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat. Under the initiative of the current RAMSI Special Co-ordinator, James Batley, a lot of work has been done with the SIG to jointly establish agreed targets for all areas that RAMSI is focusing on such as law and justice, machinery of government and economic governance.

A joint Consultative Forum has been established. Co chaired by the special co-ordinator and the secretary to the prime minister, the forum is made up of the permanent secretaries of the seven key government departments and the head of the RAMSI programs in these reform areas. It held the first of its quarterly meetings last November. The next forum - originally due the day before the general election - will look at the First Annual Performance Report which has been produced using 51 separate indicators – all developed in discussion with the relevant Solomon Island authorities or counterparts. These draw on four different sources of data: program level reporting; analytic surveys; peoples survey; and capacity building surveys for each of the ‘pillars’ of RAMSI’s civilian reforms such as economic governance, the law and justice sector, and the machinery of government.

The second half of this equation is more vexing however: how to get, how to empower Solomon Islanders to step up instead of stepping aside in the face of all this daunting change, foreign expertise and at times lack of understanding of the context in which things have been done - or not done - in the past or as they say in Solomons’ pidgin *fitim Solomon*. Certainly RAMSI’s efforts have suffered not only from a lack of real engagement by many of the country’s leaders and technocrats but even more dangerously a lack of scrutiny by and the chronic unwillingness of many Solomon Islanders to step up and take up the responsibility of the jobs they are being paid to do or the roles they’ve accepted in society. For many of the Australians and New Zealanders posted into the Solomons under the auspices of RAMSI to ‘help’ the country rebuild itself, this response or failure to respond by individual Solomon Islanders has been an unexpected and unfathomable dilemma.

The new prime minister for his part has in his first public comments, thrown down the gauntlet not just to RAMSI but to his own people saying he wants to review the imposition of Australians or other expatriates in sensitive areas of government such as in the ministry of finance and the police. This may have in part been fuelled by the ill-judged political decision last year to insist an officer of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) fill the post of police commissioner as head of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIP); funded by Australia. But it has also been an open secret for many months in Honiara that most of the nation’s politicians would like to get their hands back on the state’s coffers with a varying degree of ill intent. It may not be all bad news if Sogavare can locate and genuinely intends to appoint Solomon Islanders with the capacity and moral fortitude to cope with such roles as the accountant general; a position currently held by a gutsy Australian bureaucrat who daily finds landing on her desk, outrageous requests and explanations of expenditure that arrive without a blush from the most senior of the country’s bureaucrats and politicians.

Regardless of this, there is an urgent need for a far more sophisticated and co-ordinated approach to the induction of all members of RAMSI upon their arrival in Solomon Islands, be they civilians, police or military because we will never be able to impart knowledge or even information if we don’t engage in a very real way with the local institutions and their personnel. This is easier said than done in a cross-cultural environment where there is often a radically different approach to communication and imparting information. A good first step would be to assist our young bureaucrats and other RAMSI personnel including and most especially members of RAMSI’s Participating Police Force to equip themselves with the precise skills they will actually need for what is an extremely delicate task of working with Solomon Islanders to rebuild not only their country but their individual capacity to contribute to this process.

I for one would like every new RAMSI recruit to be placed in a room where they are forced to sit in pairs, face each other but not speak - for at least 5 minutes! Australians don't know how to sit with silence; Solomon Islanders don't know how to speak without an indication - through the respectful space provided - of the other's willingness to listen. In short we need to listen and to learn from Solomon Islanders about how best to communicate with them, to listen to what they think, what they need, what they believe they can contribute and what they think we might be able to bring to the RAMSI table. To do this using a common language would be a good start. While many Solomon Islanders are quite articulate in English, the absence of all but a few pidgin speakers in the civil but particularly the police arm of RAMSI is a major weakness. For the benefits it could bring, learning even cursory pidgin should be compulsory for all new starters at the very least to give officers and officials an appreciation that speaking English badly, slowly and loudly is not the same as speaking pidgin.

Nowhere is this the need for a change in approach and preparation more apparent than in the pivotal area of law and order where having secured most of the guns and prosecuted many of the hard core violent criminals, RAMSI's Participating Police Force (PPF) led and largely staffed by officers of the AFP's International Deployment Group (IDG) are grappling to know how to relate to, let alone rebuild a force decimated by the purge required to clean it of officers involved in the recent lawlessness. The scene of the April 2006 protests outside parliament where the predominantly Australian and New Zealand PPF officers could be seen acting in a seeming vacuum from both the mood of the crowd *and* the senior ranking local RSIP officers present at the scene was a chilling illustration of the dangers of trying to rebuild someone else's country without being steeped in understanding of that culture and the dynamics of that community.

There are serious questions about the IDG's ability to carry out this task successfully without greater and more thorough training of those individual officers who are expected to work in Honiara or are shipped off to the isolation of SI provinces and expected to 'teach' the local copper what policing is all about. A run-down on Solomon Islands laws might be a good start, along with a greater emphasis on techniques for training and mentoring, not to mention a proper grounding in the all encompassing nature of RAMSI's role and ultimate goals in Solomon Islands.

There are some very good developments within the RSIP and the resurgence of the Solomon Islands Police Academy and the good work flowing from the training going on throughout the force from there is a very good start as is the Leadership Development Program for the RSIP which is being carried out in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Police Management. But there are questions such as whether the PPF's step back from frontline policing has been too fast? Whether the expectations being put on the RSIP in its current state - perhaps not even a third of the way through the rebuilding process - as a consequence may be premature? Whether in fact the move from rank to the role and badge of advisor for all PPF officers has had the desired effect? All these questions need to be asked. Should we be slowing down this process, consolidating the gains before we undermine them indefinitely?

At the heart of these issues, is the rapid changes that have been required of the AFP by the new demands of Australia's more proactive role in the region and the changes in the world in which the AFP must now operate. The formation of the IDG is in itself a function of these changes and is currently deployed in 9 missions throughout the world none of which bar Cyprus existed a decade

ago. It remains however in this very early stage a self-described work in progress. While great achievements were made by the RAMSI 1 deployed in the first 12 months from July 2003 - the surrender or seizure of most guns in the community, the arrest of most of the militant and criminal leadership – the organisation of the PPF's rapid deployment to the Solomons, led to a lack of long term planning, personnel management, skills matching and continuity of postings which have all had unintended aspects in other areas of RAMSI's operations such as dire need for expert community policing or the fight against corruption, one of the buzz words of the mission from the start. (Although six ministers of the highly compromised Kemakeza Government were arrested in RAMSI's first two years, probably the single greatest blow to Solomon Islanders trust and confidence in RAMSI remains its failure to act on allegations against Sir Allen Kemakeza or any of his key cronies.) A time and resource consuming exercise, police corruption investigations, despite the establishment of a dedicated Joint Corruption Taskforce, have been hampered by the number and length of postings of most PPF officers to this job.

Who might ask these questions about the design and effectiveness of the PPF role in RAMSI is unclear. Will the Special Co-ordinator of RAMSI, the AFP, the head of the IDG or the head of the PPF be able to step back and take a look at this, can Shane Castles, also an AFP officer, make these calls? Will the new Solomon Islands (acting) police minister? What is certain is that it is crucial that changes be made and they be made quickly. To a degree the IDG has been attempting this. Already there has been an acknowledgement of the need for a wider skill-set particularly in such areas as community policing and vacancies in the IDG are now advertised throughout Australian state and territories, pidgin classes are offered on a weekly, voluntary basis, the length of deployment has been stretched for many officers into cycles from 40 up to 60, 80 and 100 weeks and family accommodation is in the process of being constructed in order to attract a more stable long-term officer to the force.

There is much at stake. If, as recent events suggests, the growing number of progressively more impoverished Solomon Islanders are no longer willing to tolerate bad governance so placidly as they have in years past, RAMSI forces may find themselves confronting the very people that should be their natural allies in these reforms.

Last month's unrest required a rapid hike in the number of both troops and police deployed under RAMSI, bringing the mission's military contingent back up to 430 personnel from the paltry 63 that was all that had been deemed necessary in the period leading up to the riots. Drawn mostly from Australia and New Zealand they remain on the ground with the additional 120 police shipped in to boost the PPF's numbers over the 450 mark.

The absence of an adequate military back-up for the PPF during the April riots raises another set of questions. The deployment of RAMSI's military contingency is to provide support to the PPF not to lead the mission, risk assessment is therefore one of the prime tasks of the mission's joint intelligence group. The peculiar role of the military in RAMSI in itself limits the quality and depth of contribution that can be made by the ADF, a fact very much to the mission's detriment and very much evident at the time of the riots when just over 60 troops were in Solomons none of which were available for deployment in support of the increasingly overwhelmed police. Clearly the deployment of around 60 troops had been deemed commiserate with the assessed threat. That the bulk of these troops have been deployed to provide additional security at Honiara's main jail since a riot there

in 2004 did not dissuade the mission from allowing the remaining available troops, excluding headquarters staff, from making a non-urgent patrol to the country's Western Province.

PPF head Will Jamieson has stated publicly that there was no intelligence to suggest the kind of orchestrated violence that the police ultimately faced. If not a failure of intelligence, at the very least this points to an alarming lack of institutional memory within the mission at this time. Although the precise timing of the assault may have not been anticipated by many Honiara residents, the idea of the criminal forces aligned against RAMSI biding their time and making such an attempt to undermine both public confidence in RAMSI and to demotivate and distract the mission, has been anticipated by many Solomon Islanders from RAMSI's very inception.

Such confrontations between white foreign cops and angry black locals as was witnessed in April 2006 not only left 25 RAMSI personnel injured but also provides very bad optics likely to quickly undermine popular and therefore political support in both Australia and New Zealand and even more significantly in the other participating island states such as Fiji, for the mission if repeated.

Finally but not the least RAMSI must get better, smarter and faster at getting its message out to all stakeholders. Right now the mission still has enormous support from the broad mass of Solomon Islands who genuinely and wholeheartedly appreciate the turn around in their lives that RAMSI's deployment has wrought. But there is never an exhaustible supply of good will towards an intervention force. The people of Solomon Islands are now demanding good governance, and that also means they need to know what RAMSI as their partner might be prosecuting on their behalf. They also need reassurance about the nature of that partnership. Those who have just taken office as the new government, may have listened less to politically-motivated misinformation about RAMSI and taken less umbrage if they had been drawn into this partnership more fully in their previous life as an Opposition and been better briefed about developments such as the Joint Consultative Forum. The failure to prioritise and co-ordinate public diplomacy as a vital aspect of the mission's existence across all its various manifestations, the reality of the smallness of the 'r' in RAMSI - that is the regional nature of the mission - as experienced by most Solomon Islanders have all contributed to an opportunity lost in the maintenance of that all important public support which has been so crucial in assisting the mission in weathering some earlier storms including the murder of Australian Protective Services Officer, Adam Dunning in December 2004 and the heated parliamentary review of RAMSI's enabling legislation the same year. Like any marriage where desperate circumstances rather than real attraction have dictated the necessity of an ongoing partnership, there were always going to be the issue of managing mounting tensions generated by the presence and actions of an intervention force, even a regional one that was so enthusiastically invited in. The degree of honest self-examination, imagination and skill with which such issues are resolved by both the Regional Mission and its hosts, be it the Sogavare Government or the ones that succeed it, will be pivotal not only to a successful RAMSI but will also determine the as yet uncertain future shape of Solomon Islands and its people.