

***State Society and Governance in Melanesia Project  
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***RAMSI's first 100 Days!***

by

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RAMSI's (Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands) first 100 days in Solomons has been nothing less than outstanding! Within a few short months, the 2,000+ strong intervention force of Australian/New Zealand military personnel and police members from Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Island nations--Tonga, Fiji, PNG, Samoa and Vanuatu--have substantially reversed the country's slide to rooted lawlessness.

Through the RAMSI initiative almost 4,000 high powered guns and other weapons have been confiscated and most encouraging, destroyed either by dumping them into deep-ocean depths or burnt beyond recognition. Few if any have been stored away only to be looted once again as had been the case during the previous five years of Social Unrest. During this same period of time major high profile warlords--the most notorious, Harold Keke of Guadalcanal's Weather Coast and Jimmy Rasta of North Malaita--have been captured, locked up and are currently awaiting court appearances. All this without a single shot being fired. As well, many of the country's strutting Rambos--25 Solomon Islands Police officers as well--have also been locked away, booked to await their day in court for their many serious crimes of theft, rape, intimidation and physical attacks.

RAMSI's fast work in gun collection and the peaceful capture and jailing of serious criminals has brought a welcome relief to the ordinary people of Solomon Islands. High powered gun firing at all hours of the night no longer rocks Honiara town. Ordinary citizens' relief at once more experiencing the basic joy of peace and the police's quick response to public misbehavior at markets, shops and simply walking town streets or going to village gardens has risen substantially.

On a more positive note, the intervention forces especially its police component have erected more than 16 police posts in the Solomons' rural areas to drive home the idea that peace, order and tranquility are part of a healthy society's life-pattern and not simply that of Honiara and provincial capitols. Police posts with local personnel manning them accent the new outreach pattern for touching villagers' lives in a most practical way. This new police work dimension differs in stark contrast to the recent past when armed guerillas were officially established as 'special constables' and incorporated into the police force. It was common knowledge that these same 'special constables' threatened the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance at the point of a gun to gain millions of dollars.

But the law and order issue, as important as it was and continues to be, is much more than a policing problem. Over the years the nation's political elite with their hangers on and cronies assumed that the government purse, national resource base and the country's

wealth somehow belonged to them. From the earliest days of independence, through the logging period of the late 1980s and middle 1990s, politicians, bureaucrats, local leaders, power brokers, conmen and their hangers-on sought to milk the national treasury dry.

Sometimes it took the form of inviting in foreign logging firms that could bring so-called development to their people but especially for themselves. Provincial and local leaders as well must be counted among those who saw the local resource base as somehow a personal private good able to be converted to dollars for themselves. The most profitable way of getting rich quickly, however, has been to tap into foreign aid monies. The World Bank education loan in the late 1980s, for instance, featured a neat way for national leaders to siphon off monies into their own pockets. An inconclusive court case or two proved that monies had indeed been diverted but how much and to whom were never conclusively proven. In 1997, for instance, the Prime Minister, S. Mamaloni, publicly accused a number of senior public servants of having misused millions of dollars of public funds. The court case against these officers, unfortunately, collapsed for lack of evidence.

RAMSI's insistence on stocking the Ministry of Finance with accountants and other high-level fiscal officers drives to the heart of Solomons' Culture of Corruption. If a return to normalcy is to root effectively, however, it will take years, not months, of patient and persistent effort to weed out incompetent, corrupt practices and people. It is this part of the RAMSI pattern of change which will begin to reverse the country's slide to a Culture of Corruption.

Basic peace has returned to the Solomons. Setting in place financial structures which make professional theft much more difficult is a much needed step but will take years of practice to bear fruit. In the meantime, however, the churches, civil society, NGOs and women's groups must act as the organizational underpinnings to reach out to the village, the backbone of island society. Melding hundreds of different tribes and cultures into something resembling a nation stands as the highest national priority for the next five to seven years.

Nation-building is a difficult task, takes time and above all, the nation-builders must be dedicated and committed to such an enterprise. This is where the churches come into play. Over the past 100 years, they have proven themselves to be close to the people. Their vast village networks scattered across many islands, their active presence among the majority of people and their moral authority give them an ideal platform to help create a viable nation. Of course the school system must become more closely involved in nation-building but that work is long term. The churches, on the other hand, must gear themselves up for the short and medium terms so that when today's school children graduate they really do find a country that is already traveling the nationhood road.

Refusal by the churches to become the lead actors in this most difficult enterprise makes it almost impossible for other organizations or structures--Civil Society, Women's Groups, NGOs, etc.--to accomplish this work on their own. Over the past 25 years, the political elite who should have been at the forefront of nation building, have proven themselves singularly unfit for such a task. In spite of state wealth, power and prestige, the masters of the state, its politicians, did not think nor act in any nation-building way. Church leadership, however, in dynamic partnership with other national leaders must see

themselves stepping into this widening and dangerous gap in Solomons' history. The nation's five years of Social Unrest took a generation to come to a head. Re-inventing the nation once again will take as long. RAMSI has given us a breathing space, an opportunity to set things right once again.