



Photo – David Karonidis

Elsina Wainwright

Dr Elsina Wainwright, Program Director with the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, is an expert on Australia's relations with the Solomon Islands. By July 2003, Solomon Islands was close to being a failed state and, at the request of Solomon Islands Prime Minister Sir Allen Kemakeza, Australia agreed to lead a mission to undertake the restoration of order in Solomon Islands. The mission has continued – police-led, consensual, multinational and with regional support, UN-endorsed and for the long term. To give a brief overview of how the mission is progressing, Dr Wainwright addressed The Sydney Institute on Tuesday 29 November 2005.

AUSTRALIA'S SOLOMON

ISLAND COMMITMENT: HOW IS IT PROGRESSING?

Elsina Wainwright

It has been over 28 months since the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) deployed at the request of the Solomon Islands Government and with the support of the vast majority of Solomon Islanders. Much has changed in Solomon Islands since then. So how is the mission faring? What are the challenges that lie ahead, and what lessons might be learned?

RAMSI's arrival

Over 2,000 police, military and development experts from Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Fiji¹ arrived in Solomon Islands on 24 July 2003 to find a state in crisis: armed criminal gangs held sway, the government was paralysed, and the economy had collapsed.

The mission's key objectives were to restore security, to assist with economic revival and governance, and to help rebuild Solomon Islands' institutions. RAMSI was to be a state building operation with several phases and multiple elements, and a number of Australian agencies were to be involved. Mission personnel were to be placed in line positions and advisory roles in Solomon Islands agencies, and a civilian Special Coordinator was to oversee the operation.

The restoration of law and order was assessed as the most urgent task, and it was a task deemed more appropriately led by police than the military. The sizeable military presence was to provide the police with protection and logistical support.

RAMSI's progress

The intervention in Solomon Islands has recorded a number of important achievements. It took only weeks for RAMSI to restore law and order and for Solomon Islanders to start to feel secure again. The sense of security has for the most part endured; almost 3,700 weapons have been recovered and over 6,300 arrests have been made.

Mission personnel expeditiously put in place a workable budget, managed down government debt, and removed ghosts from the payroll. They also helped to improve revenue collection; as a result, the Solomon Islands Government experienced a 40 per cent increase in revenue in 2004.

RAMSI's second phase, in 2004, continued the focus on law and justice, and also involved economic revival measures and the beginnings of institutional reform. Reform of the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP) has been a particular emphasis: approximately 25 per cent of the force has been removed (around 400 officers) and 88 of those officers (including two deputy commissioners) have been arrested and charged with corruption, murder or serious criminality. In addition 150 new recruits have been brought into the force in five training courses.

The mission has also been providing significant support to the prisons and judicial systems, which have had to absorb the large number of post-RAMSI arrests and prosecutions. Australia has assisted in the construction of facilities, and about 35 legal experts are serving in roles such as magistrates and prosecutors.

Around 20 RAMSI personnel have been working with the Solomon Islands Ministry of Finance. Their work has included assisting with an economic reform program to encourage the growth of investment and the private sector. In the last few weeks, the *Foreign Investment Bill*, an important regulatory reform initiative, has been passed through Solomon Islands parliament. The mission is also working to strengthen the machinery of government, such as Cabinet processes, the public service, parliament, and electoral systems. This involves efforts to improve accountability and transparency in government, and to build up institutions such as the Ombudsman and the Auditor General.

Phase three of the operation has been under way this year, with RAMSI providing assistance under the Law and Justice, Economic Reform, and Machinery of Government pillars. The mission is currently comprised of around 150 civilians (with personnel in the Cabinet Office as well as in the Departments of Finance, Justice, Health, Public Service, Lands and Police) along with 345 members of the Participating Police Force (PPF) and around 70 military personnel.

Phase three has involved a greater emphasis on development and capacity building, as well as continuing efforts at reform. The RSIP, for example, is now doing more of the operational work, while the PPF is focusing on training, mentoring and supporting the RSIP, advising on RSIP investigations, and targeting corruption.

The PPF-RSIP Joint Corruption Targeting Task Force has had some notable results, with the arrests of a number of senior politicians

and bureaucrats, including the former Police Minister and the former Health Minister. The ethnic tension-related trials are also under way: they are proving to be cathartic for the Solomon Islands' population.

But the operation has experienced setbacks as well. As the sniper shooting of Australian Protective Service officer Adam Dunning in December last year showed, some security issues remain.² Criticism of the mission has come from some quarters, and legal challenges have been brought against it. There has also been recent unrest in Rove prison: the backlog of court cases has meant a long lead time for some trials, and those facing mandatory life sentences if convicted for murder have little to lose by fomenting trouble.

The Pacific Islands Forum dispatched an Eminent Persons Group (EPG) in May this year to review RAMSI. Their resulting report broadly endorsed the mission, while offering a number of recommendations for RAMSI and the Solomon Islands Government, and suggestions as to how the PIF and the Forum Secretariat could assist. A number of the recommendations for RAMSI are being implemented.

The EPG Report drew attention to criticism that RAMSI is Australian-led and significantly Australian-staffed, and recommended an increase in Pacific Island representation in the PPF and the civilian contingent of RAMSI.³ However, the Report noted that such criticisms, particularly when made with regard to the PPF, "do insufficient credit to the contribution made by the Pacific Island Countries, many of them with few resources to spare."⁴ Other Pacific Island states have skills shortages themselves, and it has been hard for the mission to find personnel with the relevant expertise.

RAMSI still enjoys great community support in Solomon Islands: a recent survey by a local NGO found that 90 per cent did not want it to withdraw quickly.⁵ Some of the sniping clearly comes from those affected by RAMSI's investigations and scrutiny of public finances. For example the then Police Minister, who complained of a split between the PPF and the RSIP, was subsequently arrested on charges of corruption. Nevertheless, it does seem as if the "honeymoon" period is over, and there is a lot of hard work in front of the operation.

Challenges facing the mission

State building operations are highly fraught and complex undertakings. Around the world they have either found it hard to restore security - for example, in Iraq and Haiti - or have encountered difficulties with sustainable reconstruction efforts once security has been restored - such as in Bosnia and East Timor.

RAMSI has thus far been one of the more successful state building enterprises worldwide. The mission has clearly benefited from a supportive and relatively small population. Still, it managed to

restore security remarkably rapidly, stabilise the budget, and help the country again record positive economic growth. Now it is pursuing the difficult tasks of rebuilding institutions, combating corruption, reforming the economy, and making all of its efforts sustainable. Many challenges still lie ahead.

• ***Managing expectations and showing results*** - RAMSI is in part in danger of becoming a victim of its own success. Law and order was restored so rapidly and there was such a pronounced sense early on that things had changed, that Solomon Islanders now have high expectations as to what else RAMSI can and should do. Managing these expectations will be an ongoing challenge. And while RAMSI remains popular, any statebuilding operation stands or falls on its capacity to keep improving the lives of the local people. The mission must therefore continue to show results.

• ***Targeting the “big fish”*** - When RAMSI arrived, Solomon Islanders clamoured for the mission to target the “big fish”—senior figures Solomon Islanders believed to be involved in corrupt activity and in fostering ethnic tensions. Since then, the local community has responded favourably to the number of high profile arrests that have occurred, while also wanting further investigations into other “big fish” to continue. Investigations and prosecutions have been a delicate business. Their reach has extended to the political level, and some of the people implicated in corrupt activity are among those who invited RAMSI in to Solomon Islands. This continues to present obvious difficulties, and has to be managed with great care.

Collecting evidence and resurrecting Solomon Islands’ near moribund law and justice system has been no small task for RAMSI, and the mission will face a real test once the corruption cases start to come to court. Corruption investigations require Solomon Islanders to provide evidence against some of the “big men” in society, which, in turn, requires people to feel comfortable that RAMSI is there for the duration. And satisfying the evidentiary onus in complicated fraud and corruption prosecutions might prove harder for RAMSI than in the assault and murder prosecutions which more characterise the cases against militants that are currently being heard. Solomon Islanders expect successful prosecutions; this will be an interesting challenge for the mission.

• ***Relations with the host government*** - RAMSI remains in the country at the Solomon Islands Government’s continued invitation. The mission is therefore based on a minimal derogation of Solomon Islands’ sovereignty. It was certainly easier for the mission to gain its mandate by engaging with the Solomon Islands elites, some of whom have been implicated in the extortion of public funds. But it has endowed the operation with a fragile foundation. While RAMSI currently enjoys a reasonably good relationship with the Solomon

Islands Government, and the parliament as a whole currently supports the mission, a realignment of political forces in Honiara could see that support diminish.

And a political realignment will likely take place at the national elections in March/April. This is the first time since RAMSI's deployment that Solomon Islanders will have a direct say in the future trajectory of their entire country. Maintaining the momentum for reform has proved difficult as members of parliament prepare for the election.

A 50 per cent turnover of MPs at elections is quite common in Melanesia, and as many as 85 per cent of incumbents were voted out in elections in Solomon Islands' Western Province this year. Whatever the outcome - and some predict a more than 50 per cent turnover - RAMSI will face a new political landscape, one in which support for it cannot be assumed. An influx of new MPs would also have implications for the machinery of government and parliamentary processes.

The mission is aware that to lessen the risk from changing political alignments, it needs to continue to cultivate two tiers of support: the political level, but also the grass roots level. A new parliament in Honiara is less likely to move against RAMSI if to do so would incur considerable popular opposition. That is why public affairs has become a key component of the mission: the aim is to inform Solomon Islanders as to what RAMSI is doing and what is not within its brief, as well as to counter misinformation.

• ***Solomon Islands' economic prospects*** - RAMSI's restoration of security, stabilisation of finances, and assistance with economic reform have helped Solomon Islands to have the fastest growing economy (at 5.5 per cent) of the Pacific Island states in 2004, and the country looks set to experience 5 per cent growth in 2005 and 2006.⁶ But three cautionary observations need to be made. First, a lot of this growth has been driven by logging at unsustainable levels: by 2015, at current rates, the forests will be gone.⁷ Second, Solomon Islands' population growth rate is 2.9 per cent - among the highest in the world - and it is hard for the economic growth rate to exceed it. Over 50 per cent of the Solomon Islands' population is under 20, and there is an insufficient number of jobs. And third, according to the International Monetary Fund, Solomon Islands' real per capita GDP is the lowest of all the island states in the Pacific, and the country would need annual growth of 4.5 per cent for around 27 years before it regained its per capita GDP from pre conflict days in the mid-1990s.⁸

Solomon Islands is a resource-rich economy, with forests, fish, cocoa, and copra among its chief exports. With the requisite structural reform, there is certainly potential for further economic growth. But there has been some resistance to such reform at the political and bureaucratic levels in Solomon Islands. This stems in part from a lack

of appreciation of the scale of the challenges facing the economy, in part from vested interests, and perhaps in part from a genuine resentment of RAMSI's assistance and the remedies it is proffering.

Ultimately, as with some other Pacific Island states, there is a question as to how viable the Solomon Islands' economy can be. RAMSI could achieve all of its objectives for reform and institution building, and this might still not be enough to make Solomon Islands' economy a going concern in the long term.

- ***Ongoing ethnic tensions and security concerns*** - There remains a considerable amount of suspicion and resentment between the people of Guadalcanal and Malaita. For many years, young Malaitan men have left their populous, under-developed island in search of opportunities elsewhere - and many have settled on Guadalcanal. This of course was one of the root causes of the tensions which destabilised the country from 1998-2003.

Ensuring neither side perceives unfair treatment requires continuous attention from RAMSI. This includes the location of provincial development projects as well as the handling of investigations and prosecutions.

Of course, the ultimate resolution of ethnic tensions is not within RAMSI's remit. The causes of such tensions are among a number of issues that must be addressed by the Solomon Islands Government and people for peace to be long lasting. If they are not addressed effectively, the country risks relapsing into instability after the operation's withdrawal.

And though there have not been many incidents in the last several months, residual security issues need to be constantly monitored, and threats to PPF officers remain. There are still high-powered weapons hidden away, especially on Malaita.

- ***The need for provincial development*** - In its first two years, RAMSI was something of a 'Honiara miracle'. This was understandable - a large number of RAMSI personnel have been based in Honiara. It was also in part necessary - restoring a sense of law and order to the capital was vital, and other urgent requirements such as stabilising the budget and starting to repair Solomon Islands' institutions required significant action being taken in the centre.

However there is now a need for an increased mission presence in rural areas and a greater emphasis on provincial development. Eighty-five per cent of the population lives in rural areas, and service delivery and infrastructure in these areas are particularly poor.

Australia and other donor states are now focusing on provincial development. RAMSI has embarked on rural livelihood and provincial governance projects, and donors are funding infrastructure in rural areas. There is also an awareness of the need to provide some geographical balance to provincial development, particularly with

regard to Malaita. Some provincial development balance and more effective centre-province service delivery are important factors in maintaining province-province relations and therefore long-term stability.

• ***The problem of dependency*** - There is also a risk that the mission will entrench a culture of dependency. The scholars Francis Fukuyama and Michael Ignatieff have written of the tendency of statebuilding operations to engage in not so much capacity building as “capacity sucking-out”.⁹

A number of RAMSI personnel, especially the police, have had to make the transition from often doing the job themselves to a role more characterised by mentoring and skills transfer. Such a role takes more time, and can sometimes be frustrating. But for RAMSI’s endeavours to be successful, they must be sustainable. Unless processes are bedded down and expertise is transferred, the situation in Solomon Islands could revert upon the mission’s withdrawal.

RAMSI is aware of this and is now focusing on capacity building, but there have been some constraints to transferring expertise. A considerable number of vacancies in the Solomon Islands public service remain, and these have proved hard to fill. Within some ministries, there are a lack of Solomon Islands’ counterparts to mentor and train.

Furthermore, Solomon Islanders continue to have a pronounced lack of trust in their leaders and in state institutions. The RSIP, for example, was deeply compromised during the tensions, and many Solomon Islanders continue to prefer to deal with the PPF. While this has enabled the mission to more easily gain Solomon Islanders’ trust, if not overcome, it risks hardening reliance on RAMSI.

In respect of the police, the mission is making a concerted effort to have the RSIP rather than the PPF perform operational tasks, and it has a media strategy to build up the RSIP’s public profile. But rebuilding Solomon Islanders’ trust in local authorities and institutions will be a lengthy process.

• ***Legal challenges*** - The court cases against RAMSI also present a challenge. RAMSI is underpinned by Solomon Islands enabling legislation, under which personnel have immunity from legal proceedings in Solomon Islands for actions in the course of or pertaining to their duties. The most significant case against RAMSI appears to be the Nori challenge on constitutional grounds.

Of course, any constitutional challenge invites comparisons with the successful Wenge challenge to the Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP) in Papua New Guinea, which resulted in Australian police losing their immunity and consequently being withdrawn from PNG. It appears unlikely at this stage that any case would be as consequential for RAMSI as the Wenge decision was for the ECP,

and RAMSI has more consistent political support than the ECP had in PNG, so there would probably be (if such support continues) more scope for manoeuvre in the event of an adverse legal decision. That said, the court cases are clearly a distraction for the mission and could potentially have significant implications.

- ***RAMSI's organisational structure*** - RAMSI's phased approach has meant that its initial focus was on restoring law and order, with a natural emphasis on policing. This was a highly appropriate response to the situation on the ground, but one by-product has been that the Law and Justice pillar is now more advanced in implementation than the Economic Reform and Machinery of Government pillars. The machinery of government program, in particular, commenced after the other programs, and remains lagging behind the other two. And problems, for example, with Cabinet and public service processes are affecting the progress of the other pillars.

Within the Law and Justice pillar itself, the policing component is more advanced than the court and prison components. Though considerable attention is currently being paid to the court and prison systems, there is a glut of court cases and a significant waiting time before cases come to trial.

The mission has also had to integrate a number of different Australian bureaucratic cultures within RAMSI, including DFAT, the Australian Federal Police, the military, AusAID, and Treasury. Coordination has been reasonably good, and the Special Coordinator's role has been important. Nevertheless, there have still been some frictions, and optimal coordination remains a continuing challenge.

- ***Cost to Australia, and staying the course*** - RAMSI is a costly endeavour for Australia - around \$250 million this financial year, on top of the approximately \$500 million spent in the previous two financial years. It is also a significant commitment in terms of personnel, including police and officials from the Attorney-General's, Treasury and Finance Departments.

There is a question as to the sustainability of ongoing deployments of Australian personnel, particularly of police because of the numbers required. And all state building operations face the difficulty of striking a balance between deployments that are overly long - which can discourage people with the right experience from applying - and those which are overly short - which require newly deployed staff to forge new relationships on a too-frequent basis and involve too regular a loss of institutional memory.

Solomon Islanders are keen for a long-term RAMSI presence,¹⁰ and some are concerned that Australia will wind up RAMSI prematurely and that those assisting RAMSI would be then vulnerable to traditional "payback". The Australian government has talked of a five to ten year commitment to RAMSI, and Prime Minister John Howard

has also said that Australia will stay until the job is done.¹¹ Certainly, the 2005-06 federal budget includes an \$840 million, 4-year commitment to the operation. The mission continues to enjoy bipartisan support in Canberra as well as the support of other Pacific Island governments.

And of course, the Australian government has invested a lot in the success of RAMSI, and it is in its interest for it to succeed. But any policy, especially one involving considerable ongoing cost, can fall victim to changing circumstances. For RAMSI to be effective, Australia needs to stay the course.

Lessons learned

RAMSI has much work ahead of it. Still, its achievements thus far mean that a number of observations can be made, which might have relevance to state building operations elsewhere. Today I have time to make just five.

- ***The importance of early wins*** - Events at the outset of state building efforts are very important: they set the tone for the operation and help to build the momentum. RAMSI's rapid deployment throughout Solomon Islands brought an end to the lawlessness, Weathercoast warlord Harold Keke was quickly arrested, and a gun amnesty captured the national imagination. Unambiguous successes helped to secure RAMSI's reputation - in Solomon Islands, in Australia and in the broader region, all important audiences - in the critical early days.

By contrast, the aftermath of the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq was characterised by too few Coalition troops on the ground, looting and a general sense of chaos. This helped to forge an impression and a trajectory of the post conflict reconstruction operation in Iraq that has proved impossible to alter.

- ***Expertise on the ground*** - State building operations can be only as good as the people who comprise them. One of the clear lessons of RAMSI has been the importance of the quality and expertise of the personnel, especially those in leadership positions. There have been real advantages in deploying people, particularly into leadership roles, who have prior experience in the region: an understanding of the culture and a familiarity with the language, for example, has made it easier to build up trust among Solomon Islanders.

- ***Security first, and comprehensive statebuilding*** - In state building operations, restoring security is the prerequisite for progress on all other fronts. But when a state experiences acute crisis, many of its problems are interconnected and need at some stage to be addressed as such. It would have been little use, for instance, to just combat the law and order problems in Solomon Islands without also

at some point seeking to tackle the lack of economic opportunity that helps to fuel them. RAMSI was therefore designed as a comprehensive package across a broad spectrum of state need.

- **State building takes time** - Operations need to be under no illusion that it takes a long time to repair institutions that have been systematically degraded over a number of years. The rebuilding of institutions involves the difficult, lengthy tasks of developing capacity, shaping new processes, altering modes of behaviour, and instilling confidence after perhaps years of intimidation. It also takes time to rekindle a community's trust in its leaders, police and other officials.

State building operations therefore need to be sustained over the long term. A long commitment is fraught with potential problems for the assisting states as well as the local population; either side could tire of the ongoing involvement. But a timeframe of perhaps even a generation might be what is required to create enduring institutions and an effective state.

- **What statebuilding can and cannot do** - A state building operation cannot address all ills besetting a society, and some issues involving key questions of national identity should remain outside its realm. There is a lot for RAMSI to do, but there is also much for the Solomon Islands Government and people to do for themselves. Key national issues such as land tenure, reconciliation, and constitutional reform are for Solomon Islanders to decide upon, not RAMSI. The mission seeks to provide the secure space and effective state machinery to enable these issues to be discussed.

And ultimately, states can only be as successful as their fundamentals (such as their economic prospects, population size, human capacity, and territorial defensibility) allow. All state building operations can do is to help to maximise a state's effectiveness within these parameters.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Cook Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa and Tuvalu have since become involved in RAMSI. The Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and Palau have also expressed interest in participating.
- 2 Two Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF) militia members have been arrested for the sniper murder.
- 3 Report of the Pacific Islands Forum Eminent Persons Group, *Mission Helpem Fren: A Review of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands*, May 2005, pp. 6, 10-11.
- 4 EPG Report, p. 11.
- 5 Solomon Islands Development Trust survey. See J. Roughan, "Listening with our third ear!", *National Express*, Wednesday August 31, 2005, p. 8.
- 6 World Bank, *East Asia and Pacific Regional Update*, November 2005, p. 49.
- 7 EPG Report, p. 8 and the World Bank's *East Asia and Pacific Regional Update*, p. 49. See also Asian Development Bank, *Asian Development Outlook 2005*,

- 2005, p. 61 and International Monetary Fund, IMF Country Report No. 05/365, *Solomon Islands: Staff Report for the 2005 Article IV Consultation*, Washington DC, September 13 2005, p. 4.
- 8 IMF Country Report No. 05/365, *Solomon Islands: Staff Report for the 2005 Article IV Consultation*, p. 4.
 - 9 See Francis Fukuyama, "Nation-Building 101", *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 293, January-February 2004, pp. 159-164, and *State Building: Governance and World Order in the Twenty-First Century*, Profile Books, London, 2004. See also Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan*, Vintage, Great Britain, 2003.
 - 10 Roughan, 'Listening with our third ear!', *National Express*, August 31, 2005, p. 8, and Editorial, "Time frame for RAMSI!", *Solomon Star*, Friday 28 October 2005.
 - 11 The EPG Report also recommended that "the tenure of RAMSI should be measured by the achievement of tasks rather than be time bound". EPG Report, p. 6.