



**'Moving Forward in Partnership: Ramsi, One Year On':  
Speech to the *Beyond Intervention* Conference**

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In a few weeks it will be exactly a year since the first Australian Hercules touched down at Henderson, in the early hours of 24 July. Their arrival and mine – a few hours later - signaled the beginning of a new era for Solomon Islands but equally, for Australia and Australia's relationship with the region.

Some of you may recall what I said then – and I chose my words carefully – that we were determined that from this day forward that 'Solomon Islanders would have a better life, a safer life, a more prosperous life.'

What I effectively promised, on behalf of the Regional Assistance Mission, was that Solomon Islanders would no longer have to live in fear. It was a very big thing to promise and it was not a commitment made lightly. Arriving with me that day were the first of more than 2000 police officers and soldiers from around the region who came to make sure we – RAMSI – could fulfill that promise to you as soon as possible.

I said at the time that we came as friends, to help, but that if anyone tried to sabotage our efforts, or prevent the police from doing their duty, the military wouldn't hesitate to act, to use force if necessary.

I think it is a tribute to all the nations involved that never once have the soldiers of RAMSI been forced to exercise that option. But it is most especially a tribute to the people of Solomon Islands and your clear sighted and steadfast commitment to seizing this opportunity to reclaim your nation from the thugs and thieves that held the country to ransom for three long years.

It is this commitment of ordinary, everyday Solomon Islanders - the man in the street, the woman in the village - that has enabled RAMSI to forge the partnership that is now carrying your country forward to a very different future than the one it faced just a year ago.

I believe that the majority of Solomon Islanders can see for themselves - that as that year has passed, as the militants have been disarmed, the guns have been handed in, the police force has been purged and many of those accused of serious crimes have been arrested or are subject to investigation - that RAMSI has gone a long way to keeping that original promise of helping you make your nation a safer, better place.

I also believe that the majority of Solomon Islanders recognise that in doing this, RAMSI, rather than trying to infringe Solomon Islands sovereignty, is returning it to you.

But for this to be lasting so too must be the changes. Indeed what has been achieved - although built on the successful return of law - already goes way beyond that, as we've worked to restore

the very functioning of the state. Now instead of rogue police and criminal elements helping themselves to the nation's wealth, it is actually being poured back into the government system; no longer must teachers, nurses or public servants wait anxiously to see if they will get paid each fortnight. Gradually this stabilizing of government finances is also enabling the return of services, the operation of schools and clinics and indeed police posts around the nation.

But as the first anniversary of RAMSI's arrival approaches, I feel sometimes that the recognition of the enormity of this achievement is at risk of being lost. That because the return of law and order has been so rapid, the opportunity to pick up the pieces of a normal life has come so fast, that many people are forgetting too quickly just how bad things were.

It is good that the community puts the terror and the trauma and the pain of those years behind it but it's important, I believe, for Solomon Islanders and indeed, Australia and the rest of the region, not to lose sight of what caused that pain, what led RAMSI to come into existence.

This is especially important as we enter this next stage of the process, as we all - RAMSI, the Solomon Islands Government and the people of Solomon Islands - grapple with the long and hard task of rebuilding and the re-forming the nation in a way that ensures that this newly won freedom is a lasting one. It is important we do not forget what the alternative is, that we all keep in mind what might have been.

I say this because as the first anniversary of RAMSI's arrival in Solomon Islands approaches, I've noticed that more and more Solomon Islanders are starting to express their views of RAMSI, the work we've done, and what has been achieved and what is yet to happen. I welcome this. I think this reflection and assessment of RAMSI is good and a healthy and important part of ensuring the relationship between us is an open and honest one. And I want to take this opportunity to encourage Solomon Islanders to engage in an open and public dialogue with us about the Regional Assistance Mission and its work, for without such a dialogue there can be no partnership. When criticism is made honestly it can be a good thing as it alerts us to areas that the government and ordinary Solomon Islanders think we need to improve on, and similarly RAMSI from day one has made a point of telling it straight to the people of Solomon Islands.

Indeed this workshop – “Beyond Intervention” - is a terrific example of an opportunity for constructive dialogue and I'd like to congratulate the East West Centre for their foresight in organizing it. I am very much looking forward to hearing the outcome of the next few days' discussions on my return from Fiji later this week.

But I would also like to speak about some of the comments that have been made in recent months about RAMSI that have not been so constructive. Indeed, apart from being completely untrue, some have clearly been made to provoke division and create tension amongst Solomon Islanders, in a rather cowardly attempt to drive a wedge between RAMSI and the people of Solomon Islands.

To me this is a very sad thing, having, as it does, the capacity to undermine and cloud that commitment of ordinary Solomon Islanders that I spoke of earlier, to rebuilding the nation in partnership with RAMSI.

Some of this, of course, is the natural consequence or reaction to the actions we have taken and the reforms and changes we are proposing. Those who benefited from the nation's chaos are clearly not too keen to see order restored.

No doubt most of you here today would recall that when the Australian Government first responded to the request for assistance from your government last year, it was not in a half-hearted way.

We did not offer to just come in and simply lock up the criminals and clear the streets, collect guns and then go home. We came to work with you to ensure all of this could last, could be just the beginning, just the foundations for a brand new future for all Solomon Islanders.

What the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, offered when he met with your Prime Minister, Sir Allen Kemakeza, in early June last year was a comprehensive package that included reforming the RSIP over a five year period or longer, fixing up the prisons and restoring the courts, it included stabilizing finances, balancing the budget, cleaning up and improving revenue collection, plus putting in place the conditions for economic growth, for attracting foreign investors, for rebuilding the local economy.

Most importantly it also included some very tough and long term tasks such as restoring the machinery of government, strengthening the means for dealing with corruption and reforming the public service.

Never before had Australians decided to step in to help one of our neighbours rebuild itself so completely; never before had the countries of the Pacific Island Forum come together to offer their assistance in this way. It was a unique opportunity, which Solomon Islanders grabbed with open arms.

Law and order was obviously the first item in the agreement, but it was only one part of the package. Equally as important were the economic and nation-building aspects of the agreement: the parts of the deal concerned with modernizing the economy and promoting longer-term economic recovery. Economic reform is a crucial part of our efforts to modernize the economy. A modern, dynamic economy will result in economic growth and investment, which in turn will create jobs and opportunities for Solomon Islanders.

I am pleased that after some months of serious discussion about how best to advance economic reform, we have reached broad agreement with the Government on the way forward.

Nation building also includes rebuilding the public service to ensure it is a well-resourced and well-trained bureaucracy, which can professionally support the government and deliver services to people in the Provinces. Thanks to RAMSI, all Ministries now have copies of the General Orders and shortly every public servant will have their own copy. It may sound like a small thing but it is a very basic and important step towards improving the standard of governance. RAMSI advisers have been deployed to support improved government systems, including an adviser to assist with cabinet processes and another to support the public service division, as well as providing the public service division with office and communications equipment. And an expert in public service corporate planning arrives this week to help individual ministries draw up work plans.

Lastly the agreement reached asked RAMSI to strengthen the accountability mechanisms, such as the Auditor-General, the Leadership Code Commission and the Ombudsman, to eliminate a return to corrupt practices. The community has high expectations of RAMSI with respect to investigating corruption, and we will continue to work hard on this.

It was this total package of measures that your prime minister, his cabinet and broader government, the Solomon Islands Intervention Task Force and ultimately the National Parliament

unanimously agreed to nearly a year ago. It is my belief that this agreement was very much at the behest of ordinary Solomon Islanders.

None of the tasks I have described can be achieved overnight, and much, much more remains to be done. While law and order may have returned to the country, RAMSI cannot pack up and go home yet; to do that would be to leave the job only part done; to go now would mean departing without fulfilling the full potential of our original promise. Nor do I believe this is what the majority of Solomon Islanders want.

The nation-building tasks, the re-building of government institutions, of weeding out corruption and of economic reform have only just begun. These are difficult tasks, which will require hard - and sometimes unpopular – decisions to be made by government. They require too a true partnership and I believe will only be achieved - as with the return of law and order - with the overwhelming support of the majority of Solomon Islanders.

It will be this partnership between RAMSI and the people of Solomon Islands that will determine the future of this nation, not Canberra or Wellington or Suva. The courage and commitment required is great, but after almost a year here of continually witnessing Solomon Islanders enormous capacity for both courage and commitment, I have every confidence that together we can move forward, rebuilding Solomon Islands into a nation worthy of its extraordinary people.