



**'The Role of RAMSI in Solomon Islands: Rebuilding the State, Supporting Peace':  
Peace, Justice and Reconciliation conference**

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Honiara, Solomon Islands  
31 March 2005**

Since its arrival in Solomon Islands in July 2003, RAMSI has had considerable success in stabilising the situation, in cooperation and partnership with the government and the people of that country. The focus of this paper, however, is not to dwell on the achievements of RAMSI, but rather to situate RAMSI in the overall post-conflict and peace building agenda in Solomon Islands.

One of RAMSI's core messages is that it does not pretend to be the answer to all of Solomon Islands' problems.

At its core, RAMSI is a state-building exercise. At the most simplistic level, the reason for that is because that is the role that RAMSI's mandate prescribes for it, the mandate having been negotiated and agreed between the Solomon Islands and Australian Governments in mid-2003 prior to the arrival of RAMSI in country.

As a state-building exercise, RAMSI's focus is less on the size of the public sector in Solomon Islands, than on its effectiveness and its capacity. RAMSI's work springs from a view that, whatever the size of a country, there is an irreducible minimum of functions that a state should provide, and some irreducible minimum standards that governments should observe.

Prior to RAMSI's arrival in mid-2003, the Solomon Islands state had ceased to function in a minimally acceptable way.

This helps explain why RAMSI is working in the areas it is. It has a focus in the area of law and order because the citizens in any country have a right to expect that the rule of law is upheld and that individuals should not be able to commit crimes - including violent crimes such as murder, but also crimes against the community like corruption - with impunity. RAMSI is working in the justice sector because citizens in any country have a right to their day in court and want to see justice being done. RAMSI works with Solomon Islands accountability institutions because citizens in any country have a right to expect that holders of public office behave honestly and impartially, and that mechanisms exist to guard this. RAMSI works in the area of government finances because citizens in any country have a reasonable expectation that spending decisions are taken in a responsible and accountable way - not at the point of a gun, and that taxes cannot be avoided through the payment of bribes. And RAMSI is working to rebuild the public service because citizens in any country have a reasonable expectation that governments should be able to pay public servants - let alone recruit, manage, and train them - and that governments should be able to deliver the basic services for which they are responsible: health, education and so on.

In working with our Solomon Islands partners to rebuild and strengthen the state in Solomon Islands, RAMSI is not simply rebuilding institutions for their own sake. At present, for instance, the Royal Solomon Islands Police does not carry weapons and its paramilitary element has been

disbanded. Decisions on the future of the force will be taken by the government of Solomon Islands in the course of time.

RAMSI is also promoting reform and change in the public sector through our Machinery of Government program, consistent with the government's National Economic Reform, Recovery and Development Programme - the NERRDP. Reform programs in large institutions inevitably challenge vested interests and encounter to some level of resistance to change. This is part of any process of change and Solomon Islands is no exception to this rule; indeed, if this were not the case we would be justified in asking whether we were doing our job properly. We are of course alive to the need to promote change in a sensitive way and in a way which accords with the priorities of our partners in Solomon Islands. We have no interest in change simply for the sake of change.

RAMSI has had an enormous impact in Solomon Islands. In partnership with the government and other groups, it has succeeded in restoring the rule of law; it has helped to improve the delivery of government services and it has contributed to economic recovery. All that said, no-one pretends that the job is done, or that major challenges do not lie ahead.

Yet partly because of its very success so far, RAMSI faces very high expectations from many parts of the Solomon Islands community - expectations relating to what areas we should be active in, and expectations about what can be achieved in the areas we are working in. These expectations also reflect the collapse of public faith and confidence in national institutions and leadership which has occurred in Solomon Islands over the course of the past few years. These expectations are reflected in the numerous calls for assistance - material and moral - which RAMSI receives on a daily basis, from all corners of the country. They are reflected in the call by the recent Guadalcanal Leaders Summit, for RAMSI to stay in Solomon Islands for another 10 years.

But RAMSI can't be all things to all people. In the first place, we can't because our mandate is limited. Second, we don't want to be because so many other actors - including major foreign donors such as the EU and Japan - are also active in the field. Most importantly, though, there are areas where we think it is critical that Solomon Islanders themselves take the lead, and are seen to take the lead. And these areas are precisely the ones that touch on fundamental issues of national concern: relations between the centre and the provinces, and relations between provinces themselves, issues of land use, issues of reconciliation and compensation.

These are all important issues; indeed, addressing them is critical to ensuring that the progress which has been achieved is protected and sustained, and to ensuring that the problems which have affected the nation are not repeated in future. They are at the heart of the nation's peace building agenda.

So where does RAMSI fit into this picture? What is RAMSI's role?

RAMSI is facilitating the peace building agenda in a number of direct ways: through support for and cooperation with bodies such as the National Peace Council; through collaborative activities with groups such as Transparency Solomon Islands and our interactions with groups such as Solomon Islands Christian Association; through our support for local media organizations; and through our own civic education campaigns which are planned for later this year. A number of these activities address a basic problem which many observers, both local and foreign, have identified: that Solomon Islanders are starved of reliable information about government decisions and processes, and about Solomon Islands' standing in relation to the rest of the region and the wider global community.

In the broadest sense, though, we see RAMSI's core state-building agenda as providing an essential foundation or underpinning in which discussion about these basic national issues can take place. Just as RAMSI's work provides a platform for national economic recovery, RAMSI has succeeded in creating an environment in which this national discussion can occur; an environment which is no longer seen as an emergency or a crisis; an environment in which people are free to articulate and exchange views without fear.

And discussion and debate on these questions of national importance is certainly taking place. It is taking place in the National Parliament; in the provinces and at various provincial summit meetings which have been held recently, and at the constituency level; it is taking place in the media, and in private conversations; it is taking place in bodies such as the National Peace Council, in the churches and in various civil society groups and networks.

To outsiders, this national discussion may not seem to be taking place, at this point, in a particularly structured manner. But that may be because, as outsiders, our ears are not particularly well tuned to local nuances. And in any case, the process itself - the discussion, the debate - will simply take time. Indeed, that is one of the lessons that the region has learnt from its experience in supporting the peace process in the neighbouring island of Bougainville, which began back in 1997.

So we know that working through these basic issues will take time. That is why we say that RAMSI represents a long-term commitment on the part of the eleven regional governments that are contributing to RAMSI. That is why we do not focus on an exit strategy at this point.

We also know that, without a true partnership with Solomon Islanders, there will not be lasting change in Solomon Islands. We know that building such a partnership is not always a simple or a straightforward matter, especially given the enormous damage that has been inflicted on Solomon Islands society and political system over the years. We know that we will make mistakes along the way. We know that we will be seen as challenging vested interests.

But we also know that if we don't make the attempt, we will be letting down the vast majority of Solomon Islanders who want to take advantage of the opportunity that RAMSI presents for Solomon Islanders themselves to rebuild their country, to effect real change for the better. The challenge and the responsibility is theirs to grasp.