



Address to Rotary Club Honiara

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I'm about to conclude a two year stint as Deputy Special Coordinator of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands. I wanted tonight to offer a few personal reflections on that experience.

Shortly after I arrived in Solomon Islands to begin my two year post as Deputy Special Coordinator, I witnessed an extraordinary and inspirational event on the troubled Guadalcanal Weathercoast. It was a soccer tournament at Kolina held on Easter Monday 2005. This brought together teams from 24 villages which had been in conflict during the tensions.

As an indication of the fragility of peace at that time – and this was almost two years after RAMSI arrived here – the chief of one of the villages had to hide behind a tree, 200 metres in the bush up a hillside, well away from other participants, and his team did not approach the field until it was their turn to play.

What brought people together on that day – in a piece of Weathercoast serendipity - was a thunderstorm that made everyone run for cover into a RAMSI military tent to shelter from the rain. Villagers huddled at close quarters, and got acquainted with each other again.

Last year I was invited to witness an enormous reconciliation ceremony at Marasa, also on the Weathercoast. It took more than an hour for two giant circles of people to shake hands with each other – they came from villages which had been in violent conflict. This event was occurring at the same time as the High Court trial was getting underway in Honiara, in what's called the "Marasa Beach" case.

It was a good example of kastom and formal legal processes operating at the same time. The juxtaposition gave me confidence that a mix of kastom, and improvements to the legal system, could help Solomon Islands steer its way through.

I've had many inspirational experiences in Solomon Islands and before I leave this topic, I'd like to describe a third example. This occurred in North Malaita in Malu'u. The Forum-appointed Eminent Persons Group traveled to Malu'u in May 2005 with RAMSI leaders to hear people's views about the mission and to see with their own eyes how people responded to us. Six-hundred people were there to meet them, many holding banners urging RAMSI to stay in Solomon Islands; many of them concerned that the Eminent Persons Group were going to send RAMSI home.

These kinds of experiences have given me and others in the Mission the motivation and the inspiration to continue serving the people of Solomon Islands on its long road back from trouble. They also made me acutely aware of the responsibility we have to fulfill the mandate given to us.

Everyone here would probably agree that the Solomon Islands is a better place than it was during the tensions. But peace is still fragile in Solomon Islands. RAMSI has made a difference through its partnership with government, although clearly we face a number of challenges and, in some instances, outright opposition. I will leave with some concern about how that will play out, but confident it can be worked through. I will speak more on this later.

History and the record

First, consider how far Solomon Islands has come since July 2003. Children can safely go to school, women can go to market to buy and sell goods without fear, health clinics are open for business, the streets are safe, the economy works, people are investing in the future, justice is being done and being seen to be done.

RAMSI arrived in July 2003 with the endorsement of the Pacific Islands Forum and with 10 Forum member countries contributing personnel to the mission. The legal foundation was firm – the National Parliament of Solomon Islands had unanimously passed the Facilitation of International Assistance Act. RAMSI was invited to Solomon Islands by the government because the country was on the brink of collapse.

The first thing RAMSI did was take away the guns, investigate and arrest key militant figures and restore law and order. This was done relatively quickly. We then moved onto working with Solomon Islanders in the law and justice agencies, including the Police Force, to build them up, and in the case of the police, remove officers involved in criminal or corrupt activities. Developing the individuals and the institutional capacity of the Solomon Islands Police Force and the Solomon Islands Prison Service has come a long way.

Capacity in the legal system has developed strongly. Corruption and criminal trials have occurred. Legal services are available to defendants. RAMSI is supporting Solomon Island agencies as they work on legal system reforms to reflect contemporary thinking on sentences, including alternatives to custodial sentencing.

There has been recent criticism of delays in hearing and handing down decisions on cases. This is troubling. On the one hand, no-one is comfortable with delays in the delivery of justice. On the other, the current caseload before the courts is unprecedented, and it is important that the justice system is allowed to work.

There is no room for short cuts where justice is concerned – either for defendants or the victims of crime. The judiciary has many difficult matters before it, and at this time deserves the support of all parties as it maintains its role as an independent arbiter of justice.

From the early days of RAMSI, the Economic Governance Program deployed advisers within the Ministry of Finance working alongside Solomon Islands public servants to restore systems and processes which had been abandoned during the tensions. Government finances were quickly strengthened. Spending controls are now in place. Budgets are being produced in an orderly fashion. Revenue has more than tripled in just four years.

The public service was demoralized and run-down when RAMSI arrived in 2003. A program was designed to re-build the “machinery of government”. This has involved helping the public service with better and efficient recruitment practices, bringing their own systems up to scratch again, re-building training programs, and strengthening the accountability institutions. Annual Reports and department Audits are now being delivered for the first time in many years. A civic education program to explain democracy and why elections matter was delivered prior to the April 2006 election. This program was delivered by Solomon Islanders for Solomon Islanders and visited hundreds of villages.

Our programs have been worked through with Solomon Islands agencies and Ministers, and seek to support domestic institutions. We’ve focused on another key principle of working in post conflict environments – to work with what is already in place. The emphasis has been on improving the implementation of existing laws and regulations, and to build the capacity for these improvements to be sustainable.

Everything that we have done has involved consultation with the Solomon Islands Government and their agreement, because it is a partnership. This is a central feature of this mission. It is important to the government of Solomon Islands, and to the member contributing countries of the Pacific Islands Forum.

Of course, the improvements that have occurred are by no means solely RAMSI achievements. We have played an enabling and supporting role. The critical factor in the partnership has been the fact that Solomon Islanders themselves have indicated they want an end to disorder. They have taken up the challenge themselves. Politicians, public servants, community organizations and civil society – including Rotary – as well as the general public have worked to lead Solomon Islands back to better times.

The challenges

I began by talking about witnessing inspirational events. There have been disheartening events too.

The December 2004 murder of Adam Dunning, a young Australian member of the Participating Police Force, was a low point for RAMSI and Solomon Islanders. Unrest at Rove Central Prison on two occasions gave us real cause for concern. Fortunately, conditions at the Prison are much improved today. The most difficult time though was April 2006.

The public disorder, the riots, the looting and the burning of Chinatown and other sites around Honiara, distressed many Solomon Islanders and brought back the fear that had haunted them during the tensions. More than two dozen RAMSI personnel were injured during the riots, property was destroyed and cars set on fire.

For all that, there were no firearms used on the streets, and no shots fired. The focus was first on protection of life, and then of property. Given the scale of the property destruction, it is remarkable that no one died during those two days.

Attacks on the work of the mission have gradually increased in the period since the April riots. Given how much Solomon Islanders have achieved for their country, with RAMSI's support, these attacks are particularly disappointing and perplexing.

I'd like to focus on a few recent issues.

A few months ago, the Prime Minister revealed plans to re-arm elements of the police force, and to revive groups which had been disbanded because of their activities during the tensions. There has been a loud, widespread and very public response from Solomon Islanders to this plan. As you know, we made our position known - and we welcomed the Prime Minister's decision to drop the plan.

There has been a series of unfounded allegations about RAMSI's intent and behaviour. These are unfortunate and distressing for RAMSI advisers, their Solomon Islands counterparts, and their families back home in the countries of the region – they also distract from the key task at hand: providing support to rebuild a country.

The intent of these approaches is unclear – and I'm unsure how they help SIG and RAMSI to work together, or advance the interests of the partnership. They are not supported by the majority of Solomon Islanders as far as we can tell.

At the same time, we have experienced difficulties with immigration issues concerning our personnel, and in particular, their families. This is another distraction we are keen to resolve with the government, through dialogue based on the provisions of our underpinning legislation.

For all that people in RAMSI may find their work difficult at times, what we're experiencing is marginal compared to what Solomon Islanders experienced during the tensions. We didn't have to live through the tensions. This is a post conflict society. People continue to feel the effects, and bumps on the road to recovery are no surprise.

RAMSI personnel remain focused on delivering for Solomon Islanders and their government – much of our work is unseen and unheralded, and we attempt to keep disagreements the same way. Our objective here is to provide support to those who have asked for it.

The future

RAMSI has put a lot of work into strengthening the partnership with the government – improving consultation processes, managing assessment of performance and so forth.

At the Pacific Islands Forum in October last year, it was agreed that there should be a stronger consultation process which included the Forum, and we were pleased to be part of this “Enhanced Consultation” process early last month in Honiara – it was a very positive meeting.

In the same spirit of cooperation, we will share our work with the Forum Review team when they begin this process, also agreed at last year’s Forum.

In the meantime, as requested by the Forum Leaders, we continue with our work. There is much to be done. Solomon Islands wiped off 25% of its GDP in the tensions. You don't recover from that quickly, and there are no quick fix solutions or fairy godmothers out there. Investor confidence remains fragile.

The recent police re-arming debate indicates the fragility of public confidence in a key institution. That’s not surprising, when you consider that trust in institutions is one of the first things to be broken during conflict. Relationships of trust and the building of social capital is hard won, but easily broken. Once broken, it takes time, steady work, and consistent and sensitive handling to rebuild.

That's why RAMSI has provided some limited support to the work of peace and reconciliation – to help Solomon Islanders begin to repair the social divides that conflict inevitably creates. This isn’t an area where outsiders can lead, but we are prepared to provide support, and can draw on resources of a region.

How long will RAMSI remain in Solomon Islands? This depends on the invitation of the Solomon Islands people and government, the time it takes to complete the tasks we have agreed to undertake, and the wishes of contributing countries from the Pacific Islands Forum. The key for us is developing sufficient capacity of individuals and institutions so that they can go about their work, and serve the country impartially and without fear. Solomon Islanders themselves tell us they are not there yet.

For my part, it has been an honor and a privilege to contribute in a small way to that process. I hope that my work here, only possible through the forbearance and support of my family, has been delivered with a Kiwi mix of friendliness, objectivity, and with a spirit of glad service. I’ll leave changed by the experience. I’ve learnt much from the tolerance and friendship of many Solomon Islanders, and the people from around the region, with whom I have worked.

In closing, I remain positive about the future. Together we’ve achieved a lot. We can continue to do so. That will require constant dialogue, and RAMSI has always said that we are willing to talk through any issues people may have with our work and seek constructive ways to move forward.

If warring communities on the Weathercoast can take shelter together, if villages who once fought can join hands in reconciliation, and if people in Malu’u can join together to welcome our assistance,

so can we all continue our efforts, and our partnerships to make the Solomon Islands a better place to live and grow and prosper.

Thank you.