



**'Combating corruption and rebuilding a nation':
Address to Transparency International Pacific Regional Conference**

**Special Coordinator Tim George
Honiara, Solomon Islands
28 March 2007**

It is always easiest to dwell on what is wrong, what is not working and what needs to be put right, but I thought I might - for a change - begin by speaking a little about how far we've come in the four years since the Regional Assistance Mission was invited to partner Solomon Islanders in their efforts to right the course of their nation.

It can be easy to forget how bad things were in Solomon Islands just a few short years ago. It's easy to take for granted that - visitor or local - we can all once again move freely and without fear through the breadth of this stunningly beautiful country. It's easy to forget that Solomons' public finances can now be managed sensibly, free from extortion and the shadow of the gun; easy to forget that for a time not even the most basic of services were reaching the people; that public servants were not paid and that health clinics and schools in the provinces had ceased to function. This has radically changed in the four years since Solomon Islands' friends from the Pacific region joined forces to form the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon islands, RAMSI, and work with Solomon Islanders who wanted a better future; a future free of guns, free of endemic crime and free of corruption.

When RAMSI first arrived in July 2003, our regional Participating Police Force quickly identified three priority areas that required their urgent attention:

- the collection of weapons;
- resolving the conflict on the Weathercoast of Guadalcanal Island;
- and the internal discipline of the country's police force.

As many of you know, the first two of these were achieved with astounding speed, thanks largely to the groundswell of support the mission enjoyed from ordinary Solomon Islanders. It was thanks to these Solomon Islands mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and wives who found the personal courage to pressure their own relatives and armed-wantoks into handing over their weapons that led to so many guns being surrendered so quickly as well as, ultimately, the peaceful end of the conflict on the Weathercoast that had cost so many lives and caused so much misery.

What is less well known but is fundamental, I believe, to much of the progress that has been achieved in the past four years in other areas of national life - especially the efforts to restore the rule of law - is what happened in the PPF's third priority: the Solomon Islands Police Force.

An institution which was respected at Independence as a highly disciplined force, the Solomons police were for many years a sorely neglected institution; under resourced and poorly governed. It is not surprising in some ways that by the time of the coup in 2000, the police force found itself at the heart of the nation's troubles. It was a difficult, confusing and often dangerous time for many of the good officers in the force. Yet from that very low point, the Solomon Islands Police Force - as it is now known - has over the past four years achieved a painful but radical internal reform

that I believe far outstrips any similar such reforms attempted in the past few decades by other forces in the region.

The vigorous and public cleansing of the Solomon Islands Police Force has seen the removal of hundreds of its officers accounting for more than 30 per cent of the force. Large numbers were arrested and charged with serious criminal offences, while others have faced disciplinary action.

While dramatic and difficult, this purge was just the beginning of a hard and challenging process of bringing about a change in the culture of the force; of instituting reforms to encourage the sorts of changes in behaviour and attitude needed to rebuild the SIPF into an honest, accountable and effective police force.

Strategic planning, good governance practices, internal inspection audits and having a proactive complaints regime do not make headlines, but they do make a strong, effective and professional police force. These are precisely the areas that the SIPF, in partnership with RAMSI's Participating Police Force, have been working on for the past four years and for which they can now rightly be congratulated.

I know the acting Police Commissioner, Walter Kola, who is here tonight, is not only proud but very committed to these reforms as is Eddie Sikua who, as the Force's inaugural Assistant Commissioner of Strategic Directions and Performance, now holds responsibility for overseeing much of this governance work.

Ethics is now a part of the basic training of all new police and 300 have graduated since the Academy reopened Professional Standards and Internal Investigations Unit has been established and well resourced with modern office facilities, computers, and vehicles. Staffed by 14 SIPF investigators as well as six RAMSI advisers, this unit provides us with tangible proof of the success of the police reforms. Since its establishment, following RAMSI's arrival, the seriousness of the offences being investigated by the Professional Standards Unit have been steadily decreasing and there are now very few corruption-related offences coming to light within the force. To achieve this kind of radical shift in attitudes and behaviour within a police force in just a few short years, is remarkable and a testament to the many decent, hard-working Solomon Islands police who have seized the opportunity to remake their force and their future.

I wanted to spend some time on this example because without a well-governed, professional police force, pretty much all of the other efforts in nation-making, including combating corruption, are likely to be doomed.

Solomon Islanders are always asking RAMSI to catch the big fish. One of the key bodies now dealing with corruption in the wider community is the Joint Corruption Targeting Taskforce that has 14 police investigators drawn from both the SIPF and RAMSI's regional Participating Police Force. Without going into too much detail I can tell you that the Joint Corruption Targeting Taskforce has a very heavy case load that has already led to charges being laid against two senior government officials, two senior statutory officer-holders, three former provincial premiers, five former national ministers and two former prime ministers.

A Financial Intelligence Unit – established under RAMSI's Economic Governance Program - now operates as an autonomous department under the Central Bank and is beginning to play a major role in the prevention and detection of money laundering, the gathering of intelligence on the suspicious movements of money through the country's banks and other financial institutions, as well as suspect cash dealings.

Other work being done through the Economic Governance Program includes working with the Inland Revenue Department to establish transparent and accountable processes including the relaunch of a code of conduct specifically for Inland Revenue staff last year. RAMSI advisers are also working in another corruption hot-spot - Customs, where many weaknesses have been identified and much remains to be done.

Through RAMSI's Machinery of Government program we are also working with the country's accountability institutions to help strengthen their capacity to do their jobs properly particularly as all of them have suffered - on a smaller scale - a similar fate to the country's police force in terms of a critical failure of resourcing and, in some cases, leadership. For instance, at Independence in 1978 the Auditor General's Office had 29 staff. By the time RAMSI arrived in 2003 there were just two! Indeed the office had effectively ceased to function by 2000; no audits had been tabled in parliament since 1987. Now, I am happy to say due to the combined efforts of the Government and RAMSI, the Office of the Auditor General has 28 staff and has already had 10 special audits tabled in parliament in the last year. Just as significantly the office now also has a five year strategic plan which maps the way forward not only for audits but for capacity building within the institution.

Solomon Islands Leadership Code Commission, with RAMSI's support has been able to hire eight new investigators, and is soon to get a senior investigations manager. This person will work with the Chairman of the LCC to strengthen, amongst other things, the capacity of the LCC to help follow through audit findings so that the matters concerned can be delivered into the justice system where appropriate.

Some of you may wonder why I have not yet mentioned the ombudsman; the truth is right now there isn't one! But we are hoping the legal issues around this will be resolved soon as RAMSI is also very keen to work with the Ombudsman Commission to help strengthen its work.

Of course detecting corruption is only part of dealing effectively with it and RAMSI has been very involved in providing a strong level of support to strengthen Solomon Islands Criminal Justice system - including funding for new court buildings, judges and magistrates - so there can now be real and timely repercussions for those proved to be engaging in corruption.

So RAMSI has been heavily involved in strengthening Solomon Islands ability to fight corruption and all of that is the relatively easy part, working in partnership with the co-operation of Solomon Islanders. The harder and longer term challenge is to sustain this effort so that it can bring about a broader change in Solomon Islands society, like the shift in attitudes and behaviour that is taking place in the police force.

There will of course, always be those who have a vested interest in the failure of any effort to combat corruption but we must not allow this to deter us. Ultimately your friends from the region can only do so much. It is only with the strong backing and support of Solomon Islanders that change can truly be affected and sustained.

This is especially the case at the political level where change requires real leadership and recognition by politicians and other leaders of their direct responsibility to take care in how they conduct themselves and their affairs. I was very interested yesterday to hear the comments of the Speaker, the Honourable Sir Peter Kenilorea, when he opened your conference that there is an urgent need to strengthen the capacity of elected leaders to move the country forward in a transparent and accountable manner.

I am sure many of you visiting from the Pacific Island States would know what I am talking about when I say that the importance of having a political culture free of corruption or at least one

where corruption is not easily tolerated can not be underestimated in terms of a nation's development and future. I know such matters of good governance and how to achieve it is certainly an issue much talked about by the Pacific Islands Forum.

As I mentioned earlier, none of us here is immune to corruption; all of our countries experience it. We have here tonight one of Australia's veteran corruption investigators, Frank Costigan, who also happens to be the Chair of Transparency International's Australia chapter. I am sure Frank; you could tell us many a tale of the dark and devious deals that you uncovered over the years in your landmark investigations into the seamier side of Australian society!

There is a vast difference in the impact of corruption on larger and more-established nations than ones that are still in the process of establishing their economies and basic infrastructure and putting their national integrity systems in place.

It is that hidden ability of corruption to corrode the values of good people, to undermine the best intentions of a social group or indeed a nation that has really struck me since I came to live in Solomon Islands. The corrosive impact of corruption in undermining institutions and people's confidences in them has more far reaching consequences in a relatively small and developing nation.

This is not to say that corruption in developed countries should not be condemned as vigorously as it should be in more venerable states. It is just that in developed nations, even if not discovered for some time corruption, does not usually drastically undermine the ability of the state to deliver services to its people. It does not usually mean there will be less money for hospitals, clinics and schools. It does not mean that people start to lose confidence not only in the system of government, and their leaders but also in themselves.

The cost of corruption in a developing nation is perhaps not so much hidden as disguised. Exposing this link between corruption and arrested development, allowing people to join the dots that connect the moral state of their leaders and their nation with its economic health is one of the keys to combating corruption.

It is also one of the reasons why your work and why RAMSI is now moving towards support that can strengthen those in the community, especially NGOs who wish to demand greater accountability.

For whether you are a government official working in an accountability institution, a police officer, a RAMSI adviser or a member of Transparency International your individual and collective efforts to resist and combat corruption in this country or in your own, is probably the greatest contribution you will ever have the chance to make in creating a safe and secure future not only for your nation but for its future generations.

In this I pledge our continued partnership and wish you all well.

Thank you.