



**'RAMSI's real agenda: A positive news story':**

**Address to Pacific Islands News Association Regional Conference**

**Special Coordinator Tim George**

**Honiara, Solomon Islands**

**22 May 2007**

I'd like to extend a very warm welcome to you all here today; as a regional organization RAMSI is always very happy to have the opportunity to meet up with our *wantoks* from around the region but I must say we are not used to having so many of you here all at once!

I know all of you are attending a very busy schedule of workshops today so I don't want to take up a lot of your time. I just would like to say that we are very happy to have this opportunity to support PINA both through the workshop we've funded on Managing Change in the Media as well as through the support we've been able to provide for participants from RAMSI contributing countries to attend the conference. And of course having the opportunity today to sit down and share this meal together today.

In a few minutes you will be the first to see a short video that has just been made about the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands which focuses on the role your fellow countrymen and women are playing right now in RAMSI.

As journalists you'd appreciate that a lot is said and written about this creature called RAMSI, especially here in the Solomons as well as elsewhere in the region, but I am not sure that much of this discourse actually makes reference very often to the most basic facts that define RAMSI's existence. This can lead to confusion and misunderstandings - even when all sides are acting with the best of intentions.

I think this is well illustrated by a story, that Nick Warner who was RAMSI's first special coordinator, likes to tell about a community outreach meeting he was conducting in the early days of RAMSI. Nick and his team had traveled by helicopter to a remote village in the highlands of Malaita to explain what it was RAMSI had come to do in Solomon Islands.

From the moment they arrived, the crowd proved a keen but critical audience, asking many questions and wanting to hear more on most topics. Nick first talked about the desire of Solomon Islands neighbours to help Solomon Islanders to get their country back on the right track, and how this had led to the formation of the first- ever Regional Assistance Mission; he spoke about the partnership that RAMSI wanted to forge with the people and governments of Solomon Islands. He and his colleagues spoke at length about the three basic areas that it had been agreed that RAMSI's

efforts would focus on: Law and Order; Economic Governance and the rebuilding and strengthening of Solomon Islands government systems. He also answered a common question, why do you want to do this, what's in it for RAMSI? In fact this community actually went further and asked whether it was their gold, their minerals or their trees we were actually after?

It took a little explaining that what their friends throughout the region wanted in return for all this effort was a peaceful, prosperous and stable Solomon Islands; that, that in itself, was a good enough dividend for the region.

After so many questions, and quite a lot of commentary Nick Warner was pretty talked-out by the end of the afternoon. But soon after his presentation, sitting to the side for a brief respite, he noticed one of his staff approaching with an elderly gentleman by his side. The officer explained that the gentleman, a chief in the area, was very keen to meet 'the boss'.

As those of you who have met Nick would know, despite the heavy afternoon, he was only too happy to oblige and enthusiastically shook the chief's hand, introducing himself as the 'Special Coordinator, Nick Warner'.

But the chief seemed disappointed, and a little confused which in turn prompted Nick to ask if there was anything else he might want?

Indeed there was.

It was very good to meet Mr Nick, said the chief, but where was the real boss, this Mr *Ramsey* he'd been hearing so much about?

There is probably a lesson for all of us about the need to keep our messages clear and simple and make sure we understand what it is that people don't know before we try to tell them what we think they should know!

So I thought today it might be useful to spend a few minutes simply outlining the basic elements that define RAMSI and its real role in Solomon Islands; its origins, its mandate and objectives and just as importantly the limits to RAMSI's agenda in Solomon Islands.

RAMSI is a long-term exercise aimed at helping create the conditions necessary for a return to stability, peace and a growing economy in Solomon Islands.

### Regional Partnership

But first and foremost RAMSI is a partnership; a partnership between the people and governments of Solomon Islands and fifteen contributing countries of the Pacific region. We are always keen and need to have a close and consultative relationship with the Solomon Islands Government and I am very happy that the government's new Special Envoy on RAMSI, Michael Maina, could be with us today.

As many of you will know, RAMSI was established under the auspices of the Pacific Island Forum's Biketawa Declaration (2000 Forum Leaders Retreat) reflecting Forum leaders' desire to assist

Solomon Islands address its problems in a strategic and comprehensive way. The 'Package of Strengthened Assistance' offered to Solomon Islands was unanimously endorsed by Pacific Forum Foreign Ministers when they were consulted in June 2003.

In this sense RAMSI is quite unique, it is the first time that our region has attempted something of this kind and out of it are coming quite extraordinary links and learning experiences that are being felt right across the region.

I think most would agree that it is this regional embrace of Solomon Islands embodied in RAMSI that provides the mission with its real backbone; that and the overwhelming support that the mission has received on the ground from the majority of Solomon Islands. Deployed on 24 July 2003, with a mandate unanimously approved by the Solomon Islands National Parliament, RAMSI at the time was described by some ordinary as well as senior Solomon Islanders as 'an answer to their prayers'.

A miracle can be a hard-act to follow but the importance of regional participation in RAMSI and what the mission has been able to achieve so far can not be underestimated. As near neighbours and cultural cousins of Solomon Islanders, our Pacific Island members bring knowledge, understanding and definition to the mission that would otherwise be absent.

Regional participation in RAMSI has increased steadily since the arrival of the mission in Solomon Islands. All 16 Pacific Islands Forum countries are now involved - that is 15 contributing nations plus Solomon Islands. In addition to the 60 Pacific Island police officers in RAMSI's Participating Police Force, the current RAMSI military component is made up of military personnel from Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Tonga.

More and more civilians from the region are joining the mission from RAMSI to share their expertise and experience with their Solomon Island counterparts. Right now these include High Court Judge, Justice Sekove Naqiolevu who is with us here today, as well as auditors, lawyers and trainers from Fiji, Vanuatu, Tonga and Papua New Guinea.

And of course right now the mission is privileged to have the benefit of the experience and leadership of Fiji's senior Government's representative, Mataiasi Lomaloma as our Assistant Special Coordinator.

But we would like to see more people from the Pacific serving with RAMSI; we value the *Pacific Way* of working together and helping each other. And I would ask you if you have the opportunity in your reporting to stress this in your own countries and encourage your fellow country men and women to join us.

#### Mandate

So what is RAMSI doing here? The short answer is that RAMSI is helping Solomon Islands lay the foundations for long-term stability, security and prosperity.

The overarching goal of RAMSI's work is for a peaceful, well-governed and prosperous Solomon Islands. This goal is being pursued over the long-term through a mutual commitment with the Solomon Islands Government.

Working together we hope

- to help ensure the safety and security of Solomon Islands
- to help repair and reform the machinery of government
- to help to improve government accountability
- to help the government improve the delivery of services in urban and provincial areas
- to help improve economic governance and strengthen the government's financial systems
- to help the government and the community rebuild the economy and encourage sustainable broad-based growth
- and through all this to help Solomon Islanders build strong and peaceful communities.

As you all know only too well, the media in any society has an important role in ensuring accountability of governments and building investor confidence. In recognition of this, RAMSI has in the past provided assistance to the Solomon Islands media through our "Media Strengthening Program". And I am happy to say today that we hope to recommence our assistance to the media in Solomon Islands very soon.

What is perhaps not always understood about RAMSI's mandate, is its limits.

#### Parallel Government

There has been at times talk that RAMSI is somehow setting itself up as a parallel Government. The truth is RAMSI can only work as a partnership with the people and governments of Solomon Islands.

Out of 12,500 Solomon Islands public servants RAMSI personnel occupy only 20 in-line positions alongside and 130 civilian advisers.

RAMSI advisers are located within the Solomon Islands Government systems, not apart from them. All RAMSI advisers and in-line personnel are answerable to their respective Solomon Islands supervisors, Permanent Secretaries and Ministers.

And it is the Solomon Islands Government that has the final say in policy decisions, including government expenditure. For instance experienced RAMSI economists have been working with Department of Finance and Treasury to develop and implement economic reform to drive economic growth in Solomon Islands. Reforms are considered by Cabinet and must also be passed by Solomon Islands Parliament. Solomon Islands Minister for Finance and Cabinet have the power to reject reform proposals, and have done so on occasion.

#### Sovereignty

We hear a lot about the word sovereignty, I think all I want to say about this today is that it was clear from the outset of RAMSI that the mission's intention was always to restore and strengthen Solomon Islanders' ability to determine their future.

To the extent that the work of RAMSI, in partnership with the Solomon Islands Government, strengthens the institutions of the nation, in law and justice, economic governance and growth, and the machinery of government – it is *enhancing* the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands

RAMSI's goal has always been about creating an environment that enables the Solomon Island authorities to deliver essential services to its people. RAMSI's work is aimed at enhancing the Solomon Island Government's capacity to enforce its own existing laws, regulations and systems of governance not undermine them.

A self-reliant Solomon Islands is the vision held by the committed RAMSI personnel from around the region that you see around you today ... it is the reason so many of them have left their homes and families, often for lengthy periods of time, to work with RAMSI here in Solomon Islands.

### Immunities

RAMSI also puts a lot of effort and energy into making sure members of the mission respect Solomon Islands culture, institutions, laws, personnel and protocols. RAMSI personnel are subject to rigorous codes of conduct and Commanders Orders. Because of all this scrutiny, RAMSI personnel are held to a significantly higher level of conduct than would be the case back in their home countries. This brings me to the issue of *Immunities*.

RAMSI's immunities do not give RAMSI personnel the authority to break the law and are not intended to benefit individuals. Their purpose is to ensure the effective performance of the functions of RAMSI.

If immunities were not in place, RAMSI's activities could be undermined, delayed or impeded. The threat of legal claims could be used to intimidate or influence RAMSI personnel.

Immunities are a normal part of any donor organisation operating around the world, and all diplomats around the world have "diplomatic immunity". The immunities and privileges provisions for RAMSI personnel in Solomon Islands are in line with the provisions of immunity regularly enjoyed in Solomon Islands by donor organisations such as UNDP and other multinational agencies. The diplomats who are serving here enjoy far greater immunities than RAMSI personnel do.

Immunities are therefore important in ensuring RAMSI personnel can undertake their work efficiently and effectively, in an independent and objective manner and that the mission's time and resources are not easily diverted away from the task it has come to do.

Most importantly, it needs to be remembered that the immunity provisions are subject to the Solomon Islands Constitution – the Act does not provide immunity in respect of actions that might infringe the constitution.

### Conclusion

Much has been achieved by the Solomon Islands-RAMSI Partnership so far. Those of you who reported on the tensions here in the Solomons would already have noticed many of the changes for the better, however there is still much hard work to be done and we need your help to do it. The role of the local and regional media in scrutinising the mission and providing information about RAMSI to contributing countries is a vital link between RAMSI and its work here in Solomon Islands, and the people of the countries who have contributed to the mission.

The story of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, is the story of a unique mission that combines not just the restoration of peace and security, but also economic development and growth, and I reckon it is largely a good news story for you to tell.

But it also falls to you, the media of the region, to challenge, investigate and then communicate to your people – who are all contributors to this mission – the real story of the Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands.

The situation in Solomon Islands remains challenging and the progress made so far remains fragile as highlighted by the civil unrest just over a year ago. It will take years, and the support of the Solomon Islands Government, our partners in the region and efforts of the entire population, to ensure a better brighter future for all in Solomon Islands.

I know RAMSI and its contributing nation are committed to being here for the long haul, “until the job is done”. We have measures in place to make sure that as partners RAMSI and the Solomon Islands Government can plan for when that will be.

For some areas of RAMSI, this will be sooner rather than later. In some areas RAMSI personnel have already stepped back and positions such as the Director of Public Prosecutions has once again been filled by a qualified Solomon Islander. A similar staged building of capacity for the management of Solomon Islands prison system is also under way.

But I also know the one thing, that individual members of the mission personally find hardest to do, is to say good bye to the friends they have made both within and outside of the mission but especially to their *wantoks* they have come to know and work with in Solomon Islands.