



Opening of RAMSI: A history in pictures photo exhibition – marking the 10th anniversary of the Biketawa Declaration

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Bairiki Square, Tarawa, Republic of Kiribati
11 March 2009

Kam na bane (peni) ni mauri

It is a pleasure to be here in Kiribati for the launch of this significant photographic exhibition entitled “RAMSI: A history in Pictures”.

This is my second visit to Kiribati but my first as Special Coordinator of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). I have received the same warm and friendly welcome on this occasion as I did when I was last here in February 2008.

This exhibition aims to tell a story – a story of a region coming together to help a friend in need. It seeks to bring to life and give a human face to the eventful history of RAMSI over the past seven years. The exhibition was shown for the first time at this year’s Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in Vanuatu in August. And now Kiribati is only the second country to host it. There is a special reason for that. Ten years ago, on 28 October 2000, an important agreement was signed in Kiribati at the 31st Pacific Islands Forum Leaders meeting. It was called the Biketawa Declaration and it provided a mechanism for collective regional action if a Forum member country faced a security crisis and called for assistance.

It was the Biketawa Declaration that allowed RAMSI to come into operation just three years later, in July 2003, when Solomon Islands sought assistance from its neighbours in the face of a deepening ethnic and security crisis.

My friend and colleague, Sakiusa Rabuka, the Pacific Islands Forum Representative to Solomon Islands, will tell us more about the Biketawa Declaration but suffice to say that RAMSI has been the biggest regional success story under the Biketawa Declaration so it was only fitting to mark the tenth anniversary of such a landmark agreement through a RAMSI photographic exhibition.

There were many logistical, financial and administrative challenges in getting the exhibition to Tarawa, and today’s launch would not have been possible without the support and cooperation of the Kiribati, the Australian High Commission (especially Brett Aldam and Wade Carruthers), Evan Wasuka from One Television in Solomon Islands, and the RAMSI Public Affairs Unit, in particular Tom Perry. I extend my sincere thanks to you all for a great team effort.

While not without its ups and downs, the partnership between RAMSI, the Forum and the Solomon Islands people and government has stood the test of time. RAMSI has been a remarkable success story that is recognised internationally. Working with successive Solomon Islands governments, RAMSI has helped to restore law and order, to rebuild the economy and to strengthen national institutions.

Over the past seven years, thousands of police, military and civilian personnel from across the region have served with RAMSI and worked side by side with Solomon Islanders. The exhibition is a tribute to all those people and to the partnership between RAMSI, the countries of the region, the Pacific Islands Forum (which plays a crucial oversight role) and the Solomon Islands Government and people.

The focus of that partnership is increasingly on building the capacity of Solomon Islanders and working towards sustainable outcomes because RAMSI will not be in the country forever and it is moving into a transitional phase. At the same time there is still much work to be done under the Partnership Framework. We will work together with the Solomon Islands Government to ensure this transition is as smooth as possible and occurs in a way that everyone is comfortable with.

Kiribati was a founding member of RAMSI and has made a wonderful contribution to the Mission. I would like to thank publicly today the Government of Kiribati and the 38 Kiribati police officers who have served with RAMSI since 2003. Many of them are with us today and you should all be proud of them – I know I am. I salute you and your families for the sacrifice you made in helping a neighbour in need.

Building the capacity of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force is a very important task given the vital role they play in ensuring law and order, and given the ongoing lack of full public confidence in the police despite the great strides they have taken in recent years, including their professional handling of security arrangements for the recent national elections.

The Kiribati police in RAMSI have worked in areas such as crime and intelligence, investigations, close personal protection and maritime issues. They have also operated in all nine provinces of Solomon Islands. They have demonstrated their professionalism at all times and have also brought great cultural awareness and sensitivity to their work. At the same time, as the Acting Police Commissioner confirmed to me in our discussions yesterday, all the police officers who have served with RAMSI have returned to Kiribati as better police officers who are prepared to take on more responsibility and to put into practice what they have learned. You will be able to see the faces of some of those who have worked for RAMSI on the individual country panels in the exhibition.

Finally, I would like to remind you all that this exhibition will run from today through to 4 December. We would like the exhibition to serve as an educative tool so that school children and adults alike can learn more about the role and evolution of RAMSI. It is important that the people of Kiribati gain a better appreciation of what is happening in an area of the Pacific that they may not be so familiar with although a number of i-Kiribati have established themselves in Solomon Islands.

RAMSI is living proof of what we can achieve as a region when we work together with a sense of purpose, great team spirit and an open heart. The exhibition that is being launched today by the Minister shows that such an approach has been a feature of RAMSI since its inception. I commend the exhibition to you.

Thank you and kam bati (bus) n rabwa (rapa)