



Address to mark International Anti-Corruption Day

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Honiara, Solomon Islands

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Just over seven years ago, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands - RAMSI - arrived on these shores pledging to help Solomon Islanders rebuild and strengthen this nation. We pledged to work with you to help build a peaceful, stable and prosperous Solomon Islands. To do this, RAMSI agreed to work in partnership with the government and people of Solomon Islands to help you get rid of the guns, to help restore law and order, and to help you re-establish good governance and fight corruption.

Since then, much progress has been made - the guns are gone, the rule of law has been re-established and peaceful elections have been held - but much remains to be done. In 2009, RAMSI and the Solomon Islands Government reached agreement on a Partnership Framework which sets out the priorities for RAMSI and Solomon Islands to pursue. The Partnership has identified a range of challenges that Solomon Islands and its people still face in the journey towards a peaceful and prosperous nation. A major challenge is addressing corruption. This is an issue of such significance in its impact that it needs to be addressed in every aspect of the work being carried out by the Solomon Islands-RAMSI Partnership.

Corruption takes money and resources away from their proper uses and undermines the country's future.

Corruption happens in every country but its impact is more pronounced in a country such as Solomon Islands than it is in more developed countries that have the luxury of larger economies and more robust systems of governance.

In countries such as Solomon Islands that are still trying to develop their economy and rebuild good systems of governance, corruption impacts directly on the lives of ordinary people. Put simply, what corruption does is undermine the opportunity for Solomon Islanders to live better lives by misusing the nation's resources. Corruption denies the nation's children the class-rooms that could otherwise have been built to educate more Solomon Islanders; it denies your clinics the medical supplies needed for basic health care and for saving lives; it denies the nation its potential and undermines the progress made in different areas of national life. Most importantly, it denies the people of this country the economic opportunities that would allow more people to have jobs or make a better living.

I believe many of you are aware of this and it is probably one of the main reasons you have come along today in support of International Anti-Corruption Day. I too am very pleased to be here today to mark this important occasion. I'd like to acknowledge the hard work that TSI - Transparency Solomon Islands - has put into organizing this event and their efforts more generally to raise

awareness of corruption. RAMSI is always happy to support these efforts as part of our partnership with the wider Solomon Islands community.

Transparency, which is an essential part of combating corruption, is not a new concept in Solomon Islands. Indeed, Solomon Islands traditions support transparent and accountable leadership. For centuries, Solomon Islanders appeared to have enjoyed a very transparent form of leadership. In traditional Solomon Islands villages in many parts of the country, decisions and actions of village chiefs and elders were there for all to see every day.

The challenge is how to translate this traditional transparency into something just as effective in the modern political system that now governs Solomon Islands. Solomon Islanders are no longer simply ruled by their chiefs. You have provincial and national leaders now who are responsible for a large amount of national revenue; you are part of a modern economy and a global one at that. So the question is how can the same level of transparency that occurs so naturally at the village level be achieved at the national level?

For without truly transparent leadership, without accurate information about the actions and decisions – both good and bad - of your leaders, Solomon Islanders cannot call their leaders to account. And anywhere in the world, where people cannot call their leaders to account, corruption will and does flourish. If governments don't set out what it is they want to achieve and then report against these goals, no-one is able to understand what has been promised and keep track of how their governments are using their nation's resources and demand better governance.

More established nations have found that there are many aspects to establishing and maintaining good governance and transparent leadership. These include not only the firm establishment of the rule of law and an independent judiciary but also a robust and accurate media as well as a strong culture and institutions of accountability within the state.

Addressing corruption requires action by all. Action by ordinary people demanding more of their leaders, action by leaders providing the example in their behaviour, action by the accountability institutions in reporting on the business of government and action by the parliament in reviewing, discussing and acting.

This is where the work RAMSI is doing can have the most impact if Solomon Islands chooses to take up this unique opportunity to work together with us to build strong institutions of accountability; the institutions this country needs and the people of this country deserve. For without strong local leadership, no amount of assistance and support from RAMSI is going to bring about a lasting result.

It should be said at this stage that Solomon Islands is already ahead of many other countries in that you have been blessed with an independent judiciary and more recently with a functioning and increasingly effective police force. The people of Solomon Islands can be proud of the work that has gone into rebuilding the country's justice sector and the great progress made towards the return of the rule of law in Solomon Islands. But much more remains to be done.

The RSIPF Corruption squad is now well staffed and well supported by RAMSI's Participating Police Force. The squad has many active investigations into serious corruption of all kinds. A number of high ranking public officials and politicians have been prosecuted and convicted in recent times as a result of this work.

I have also been very heartened by the increasing commitment of the media to reporting on corruption issues. RAMSI, through its Media Strengthening program, SOLMAS, is committed to continuing its support to the media's own efforts to develop their role as a watchdog on behalf of all Solomon Islanders. For a strong media, combined with civil society's demands for better management, is key to addressing corruption.

But even in partnership with you, on an issue such as corruption, RAMSI can only do so much. You, as Solomon Islanders, must step up and work with the media and with your accountability institutions to improve transparency and accountability; this is an essential part of the demand for better government in every country.

One of the best examples of the difference strong local leadership can make in the fight against corruption is the work currently being done by the recently revived Office of the Auditor General. The OAG has done some extraordinary work in showing both the scale and cost of corruption in the public sector. The work of the Office of the Auditor General, combined with the Public Accounts Committee, is central to improving public sector performance.

Over the past seven years, RAMSI has put a lot of resources into helping the OAG build its human and physical resources. Within a very short period of time, and under strong leadership from the late Floyd Fatai, the OAG began producing audit reports once again which not only checked that government funds were being used properly by departments and statutory authorities but made recommendations on how mistakes or improper use of funds could be avoided.

Despite the continuing good work of the Office of the Auditor General under the determined leadership of Edward Ronia, and the presentation and adoption of these reports by the National Parliament, very few of the excellent recommendations made by the Auditor General since 2005 have been acted upon by any of the government departments or agencies concerned.

This means that inefficient practices, incorrect practices and corrupt practices that have been identified, and that have had solutions proposed by the experts, are being allowed to continue.

Accountability agencies, such as the Office of the Auditor General, need strong and ongoing support and a clear commitment from all governments that they will implement their recommendations.

A review of the legislation under which the Office of the Auditor General operates has also been conducted with the assistance of RAMSI with a view to improving and strengthening the national financial accountability framework and the independence and mandate of the Office. However, this legislation needs to be passed by parliament for it to take effect.

Clearly there is still much to be done in the fight against corruption. The people of Solomon Islands need to play a sustained role in speaking up about corruption and reporting corruption. The prosecution of corruption cases can often be hampered by the unwillingness of people to speak up and use the justice system that is operating once again. We must draw on the strength of our friends in Transparency International across the globe – silence only lets corruption flourish. Corruption needs to be reported – reported to the police, reported to the accountability institutions and reported to the media to ensure effective action. You, the people of this nation, through your churches, through your community leaders and your Members of Parliament must demand better from your public service, your government, your leaders and yourselves. The Solomon Islands public service is accountable to your leaders who are in turn accountable to the voters – that is you. This is what good governance is all about. Both corruption and anti-corruption

stop and start with the people of this country. RAMSI is here to work with you but the choices must be made by you, the people of Solomon Islands.