

Building the Capacity to Protect:

The work of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands

Eleven years ago this month, (on June 5, 2000) armed gunmen - consisting of both police officers and civilian militants - took over the streets of this capital, forcing a democratically elected Government from office, affectively 'collapsing' the rule of law and with it the capacity of the sovereign state of Solomon Islands to protect its citizens.

Most of you here today know, and indeed may of you lived through, what happened from this point on. Even after parliament had 'elected' a new national government, without a functioning police force to enforce the rule of law, the capacity of the state to protect or even provide for its citizens, continued to erode as increasing lawlessness led the country to near economic collapse.

In 2003, at the request of the then Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Sir Allen Kemakeza, Australia agreed to fund and form with all other member states of the Pacific Islands Forum, a Regional Assistance Mission to work with Solomon Islands people, its governments and institutions to help rebuild the capacity of this state to protect and provide for its citizens.

RAMSI, as it is now known, is made up of two important partnerships which define both the shape and the overarching goal of the mission. The first of these is the partnership of the Forum states, which as the contributing countries provide the personnel that make this a truly regional mission. It is through this regional partnership, that RAMSI can be seen to be fulfilling the commitment of the international community to assist states in meeting their obligation to protect, in this case the citizens of Solomon Islands.

The second and equally important partnership that defines us is our partnership with Solomon Islands. RAMSI has always been predicated on the assumption that working together, the mission could and should assist the Solomon Islands to rebuild its capacity to protect and provide for its citizens.

I was pleased to see that the full title of the project that has produced the framework being launched today is “**Working with local strengths: supporting states to build (the) capacity to protect**” for that, in a nutshell, sums up the overarching goal of RAMSI, to work with the people, governments and institutions of Solomon Islands to help create a space safe enough that Solomon Islanders could re-engage more effectively in the business of state building than was possible during the period of conflict here known as *The Tensions*.

The research that has been done as part of this project in Solomon Islands is valuable and much of what has been set out in the framework of engagement reflects RAMSI’s own experience over the past eight years of working in partnership with the Solomon Islands.

RAMSI is a unique initiative, never before attempted by the countries of our region or elsewhere for that matter. The mission’s commitment to assist Solomon Islands goes well beyond simply creating a stable environment and strengthening the capacity of the security sector, to a much broader commitment to assist Solomon Islanders in their efforts to strengthen the functions of the state in areas such as economic management and good governance. This was an ambitious but very deliberate decision, reflecting the unanimous views of the Pacific Island Forum Leaders that the mission should assist Solomon Islanders to address the fundamental causes of their nation’s near collapse and not just be a ‘quick-fix’ focused on security.

This was new territory for all involved and has of course been a learning experience for all, Solomon Islands and contributing countries alike. I am sure my predecessors, RAMSI’s four previous Special Coordinators would agree, that we have learnt as much, if not more, from our failures and omissions as we have from our successes. What I do know is that we have always worked hard to try to ensure that the mission is transparent and accountable both at the national and at the village level.

RAMSI has always recognised that in addition to the government, the police and other state institutions, local actors such as women leaders, youth leaders, churches, chiefs and their communities, non-government organisations and the media are important

partners in the process of rebuilding the capacity of the state to protect its citizens. Identifying and drawing on the strengths of these local actors has been an important part of how the mission has sought to give meaning to its work in Solomon Islands.

In the first year of RAMSI, when the mission was new and its make-up and mandate not widely known or understood, the then Special Coordinator, Nick Warner, and Commander of the Participating Police Force, Ben McDevitt, personally devoted a large amount of their time to travelling throughout the country's nine provinces in order to consult face-to-face with the communities and their leaders whom they were seeking to partner in building peace.

But probably one of the best and earliest examples of the mission's recognition of the value of working with local actors and building on their strengths can be seen in the very close partnership that RAMSI enjoyed with the National Peace Council from the outset of RAMSI deployment on 24 July 2003. With its strong local leadership, headed by its chair, the highly respected national leader, Paul Tovua and its network of peace monitors in every province, the National Peace Council, proved to be the perfect local partner for RAMSI's Participating Police Force, in their drive to rid the country of the guns that had so undermined the nation's stability. Importantly and quite uniquely for those times, the National Peace Council had established credibility locally as a neutral body that was above the ethnic, criminal and other rivalry and divisions that had fractured the country's politics and peace. In return the Participating Police Force, backed by RAMSI's military contingent, provided the very real security and protection required if the National Peace Council was going to be able to do their work safely. This combination of the protection afforded by an international force combined with the local networks and local knowledge of a neutral and credible local body proved to be a hugely successful formula resulting in the collection and destruction of more than 4000 high powered weapons and firearms in the first year of the Solomon Islands-RAMSI partnership.

Now, seven years later, this partnership has moved to the point where together we are planning for Solomon Islands to more fully reassume primary responsibility for providing for and protecting its citizens. As part of this process, we have been holding intensive consultations with groups of key local actors such as women leaders, chiefs,

church leaders and youth. Known as *Wakabaot Toktoks*, these consultations have sought to explore the issues, the possible complications and the opportunities that the transition of the Solomon Island-RAMSI partnership may create for local actors and their communities.

For in order to assist in building the capacity of our Solomon Islands partners, we have also had to inform and educate ourselves not only about their strengths but also about the challenges involved. It has been our experience, for instance, that the traditional mechanisms for peace building and conflict resolution are not so widely known nor understood by many in the country's diverse communities. So while many speak about a desire to incorporate and meld traditional systems into those inherited more recently at Independence, there is a gap between this desire and the knowledge of how this might be achieved. To this end, RAMSI is supporting the World Bank's *Justice for the Poor* program which is working with the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs investigating and mapping the different types of traditional justice systems in use across Solomon Islands. It is only when we have a clear understanding of what is culturally in place that donors and government will be able to sensitively and productively engage with these traditional justice systems.

Having said this, RAMSI's own recent experience has shown the value of drawing on traditional mechanisms for resolving conflicts, even if the community needs to be led through a renewed knowledge of these traditions by their own leaders. Last year following the very first fatality of a Solomon Islander in the history of RAMSI's deployment, which occurred during a joint RSIPF-RAMSI operation, we sought immediately the advice of the deceased's community on the most culturally appropriate way to express both our regret and sympathy. In this we were very fortunate to have at our disposal both the Assistant Special Coordinator, Masi Lomaloma, a highly experienced and respected Fijian public servant who has now served with RAMSI for the past five years as well as Solomon Islands Permanent Secretary responsible for RAMSI Affairs, Paul Tovua, an equally experienced and respected senior Solomon Islands leader that I referred to earlier. Together these two men were able to seek out from those leaders in the grieving community, the relevant traditional knowledge to guide our interactions, to ensure that we drew on the most

culturally appropriate mechanism for moving forward without conflict. I believe Masi will discuss in more detail how this was achieved during this afternoon's discussion.

Another example pertinent to the need to recognise both local strengths and weaknesses can be found in the work we have been doing and continue to do with the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF). In recent years this work has focused on building both the capacity of individual officers as well as the institution itself. Soon RAMSI will begin withdrawing personnel from some of the 13 provincial police posts that we are currently supporting throughout the country. This is largely as a result of the much improved capacity of the local police but it is also, in part, recognition that while RAMSI's role was to help create a safe space. After nearly a decade, it is also time to make sure that we do not continue to occupy too much of that space ourselves.

Recognition that there are actors within local communities with the strength to occupy some of this space, particularly in the area of maintaining public order, is partly what has informed RAMSI's strong support for the RSIPF's pilot Community Officer program which assists communities to nominate their own representatives or *community officers* to deal with petty crime and social disorder at the village level and act as liaison point for the police. This project which builds on an earlier concept of *area constables* that worked effectively in the decade following independence, has been embraced enthusiastically by many communities and hopefully will be able to be expanded further. It is but one example of where a local strength has been identified to assist in addressing a weakness in the state's capacity to carry out more conventional modes of policing, and in particular the economic reality that the RSIPF cannot be expected to maintain a permanent presence in all of the hundreds of islands that make up this nation. I believe there are others here today who will talk later about this in more detail.

Finally, if I could commend the efforts both of the researchers and the local participants that have contributed to this important research, in bringing together the international dialogue on the Responsibility to Protect to Solomon Islands door. We have eight years of first-hand experience to share about this unique attempt by the countries of the region to *Helpen Fren*. I look forward to today's discussions and the

insight they might provide not only for those of us in RAMSI but also those in Solomon Islands and in the international community who are now going to be building on the work we have done thus far.