



Opening of RAMSI: A history in pictures photo exhibition

Special Coordinator Nicholas Coppel
Museum of Samoa, Apia, Samoa
26 July 2011

Afio mai and talofa.

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

This is my fourth visit to Samoa but my first as Special Coordinator of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands.

This exhibition was shown for the first time at last year’s Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in Vanuatu, and was viewed by the leaders of each of the 15 Forum nations, along with thousands of others.

Prime Minister, we were very proud to have you there at the opening in Port Vila.

Following the Forum, the exhibition then took the long journey to remote Kiribati, as part of the Pacific Islands Forum’s celebrations to mark the 10th anniversary of the Forum’s *Biketawa Declaration*, the agreement, signed in 2000, which saw all Forum nations commit to helping neighbours in crisis, and formed the basis for RAMSI’s formation three years later.

Then earlier this year, the exhibition came ‘home’ to Solomon Islands where over five thousand Solomon Islanders, including virtually every secondary school student in Honiara, were able to see and read about their own nation’s very recent history.

And now, it is a great pleasure for us to be able to bring this exhibition here to Samoa.

For me, and many within the RAMSI team, it was important to bring this exhibition here.

Samoa has been such an important part of the RAMSI family since the mission’s deployment in July 2003.

This nation was a driving force behind the formation of the *Biketawa Declaration*, the signing of the ‘RAMSI Treaty’ at Townsville Air Base, the arrival of Samoan police officers on Day 1 of RAMSI – the 24th of July and 2003.

Samoa’s support for RAMSI – and to the Solomons – is clear for all to see in the ongoing hard work and commitment by Samoan civilians and police who have worked in the mission over the past eight years.

Their contribution has been outstanding.

I sincerely hope that you feel the *RAMSI: A history in pictures* exhibition accurately reflects this steadfast commitment.

The 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.

While this history has not been without its ups and downs, the partnership between RAMSI, the Pacific Islands Forum, its 15 signatory nations, and the Solomon Islands people and government has stood the test of time.

RAMSI has been a remarkable regional 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.

And over the past eight years, thousands of police, military and civilian personnel from across the region, among them close to 100 of your countrymen, have served with RAMSI and worked side by side with Solomon Islanders.

The exhibition you're about to see is, in many ways, a tribute to all of those people.

And it would be remiss of me not to take a moment to recognise those Samoan Police Service officers who have served with RAMSI, many of whom it is great to see are here with us today.

Their work to build the capacity of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, a force which eight years ago was all but destroyed, has been vital to the future of the Solomons.

The Samoan 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, it is pleasing to hear, as the Police Commissioner Lilomaiva Suemalo Fou Taioalo told me in our discussions today, police who have served with RAMSI have returned to Samoa as better police officers for having worked as part of an international mission.

I know the new Assistant Police Commissioner Lafaele **Uili** Seana, can speak very personally of the experience of working as part of RAMSI - he was, after all, the very first Samoan Commander in Solomon Islands back in 2003.

To each officer, past and present, who has served with RAMSI, I would like to say thank you; thank you for your commitment and service, and for the sacrifices both you and your families have made in order to support the people of Solomon Islands.

This commitment is something that the region, the people of Solomon Islands, and your country, appreciate enormously, and it is not something that is taken for granted, not something that will be easily forgotten.

I hope, particularly those of you who have served as part of RAMSI, enjoy seeing the images of many of your colleagues, friends – and as they say in the Solomons, your *wontoks* – in the exhibition.

However beyond giving us a chance to remember some extraordinary times, the exhibition also provides us all with an opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved, and what lies ahead.

The focus of the partnership between RAMSI and the Solomon Islands is now squarely on building the capacity of Solomon Islanders and working towards sustainable outcomes.

RAMSI will not be in Solomon Islands forever, but at the same time there is still much work to be done.

We will work together with the Solomon Islands Government to ensure this 'transition' – of Solomon Islanders taking the lead – is as smooth as possible, and occurs in a way that everyone is comfortable with.

Finally, I would like to remind you all that this exhibition will run from today through to the 26th of August.

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, and learn more about the Pacific region and this wonderful example of what can be achieved when our nations come to together with a common goal.

RAMSI is a great example of the region coming together, and pooling their collective efforts with a sense of purpose, a united approach and an open heart.

I hope that this exhibition, which I will now call upon the Prime Minister to formally open, shows the true sense of what the Pacific can achieve when it combines a strong commitment with a united, 'Pacific spirit'.

Thank you and *fa'afetai*.