



RAMSI Special Coordinator Graeme Wilson...with the Solomon Sharks, the Australian Rules Football team he coached and mentored during his time in the Solomons.



Kicking goals for Solomon Islands

As he prepares to leave the Solomon Islands, RAMSI Special Coordinator, Graeme Wilson, reflects on his two years as head of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

Perhaps the familiar sight of the Sydney Swans Australian Rules Football (AFL) jumper bobbing up amongst a crowd of villagers a few days after I took over as Special Coordinator of RAMSI should have been enough of a sign.

Having played for the Swans in my youth when they were still the home team for South Melbourne, I was chuffed to find an old man on Gela Island sporting my team's colours but little did I know just how much my posting to Solomon Islands would bring me back into regular contact with the game that I love so much or indeed with another sport that is also very dear to my heart, cricket.

Now as my more than two years heading up RAMSI are drawing to a close and I prepare for the difficult task of bidding farewell to the wonderful Solomon Islands, I would have to admit that my weekly Saturday sessions coaching and mentoring Solomons' first ever Australian Rules team, the Solomon Sharks—mainly comprising boys from some of Honiara's settlement areas—is among the things I am going to miss the most.

Having helped to resurrect the game of cricket at the urging of former Prime Minister Derek Sikua, it will also be sad to say goodbye to my friends in the fledgling cricketing fraternity.

As I prepare to leave, my thoughts also turn to some of the inspirational people I have met such as Beverly Komasi who was the first recipient of the Special Coordinator's Award for Women.

Beverly runs the Mercy School for hundreds of children living around Ranadi dump on the outskirts of Honiara.

Equally inspirational have been many of the ordinary people from villages around Solomon Islands which are the backbone of the country.

I was fortunate to visit all nine provinces of Solomon Islands and everywhere the welcome

was warm and genuine. Professionally, my job as RAMSI Special Coordinator has been both challenging and incredibly interesting. I am passionate about the Pacific, so leading such a wonderful group of dedicated men and women from across the region has been an honour. It has also been a pleasure and privilege to work closely with many great Solomon Islanders such as the Permanent Secretary responsible for RAMSI, Paul Tovua.

Test of time

I am very proud to have been part of the RAMSI-Solomon Islands partnership; a remarkable success story that is recognised internationally. While not without its ups and downs, I think it can now safely be said that the partnership between RAMSI, the Pacific Islands Forum and the Solomon Islands people and government has stood the test of time.

Working with successive Solomon Islands governments, RAMSI has helped the nation restore law and order, rebuild the economy and strengthen national institutions.

RAMSI personnel from across the Pacific have worked hand in hand with Solomon Islanders to take the country forward on a peaceful and sustainable path.

This was one of the reasons I had the idea of producing a photographic exhibition on RAMSI that could not only be a celebration of this regional success story but also an enduring record of the people of the Pacific.

'RAMSI: A history in pictures' aims to tell this story—the story of many nations coming together to support a neighbour in need. It seeks to bring to life and give a human face to the eventful history of Solomon Islands over the past seven years.

This exhibition was shown for the first time at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in Vanuatu, last August, where it was viewed by

thousands from throughout the region, including a number of leaders of the 15 Pacific Islands Forum countries that contribute to RAMSI.

From there, it took the long journey to the Republic of Kiribati, a nation that has played an important role in RAMSI, not only by contributing men and women from the Kiribati Police Service but also by being the birthplace of the Biketawa Declaration, the regional agreement that paved the way for RAMSI's formation.

It is of special significance that the person who signed the agreement in 2000 on behalf of Solomon Islands was none other than the country's current Prime Minister, Danny Philip, who was the foreign minister at that time.

So I am very proud that we have been able this year, on the eve of my own departure, to bring the exhibition 'home' to Solomon Islands where the people and the events depicted mean so much.

More than 6000 people, including almost every secondary school student in Honiara, visited the exhibition which will now continue on to other RAMSI contributing countries.

Meanwhile, the journey it chronicles continues. The partnership between RAMSI and the Solomon Islands is now predominantly focused on building the capacity of Solomon Islanders and working towards sustainable outcomes that will allow RAMSI to progressively reduce its presence and eventually depart these shores.

As we move into this transitional phase and as RAMSI's role diminishes, we can expect to see Solomon Islands take on more and more responsibility and leadership in the areas where RAMSI has been working.

This is the time to look closely at the work still to be done under the Partnership Framework, the jointly-agreed strategic workplan that sets out indicative targets and timeframes with a view to RAMSI's eventual departure.

I am leaving very confident that under the leadership of my successor, Nicholas Coppell, RAMSI will continue to work together with the people and government to ensure this transition process occurs in a way that, first and foremost, protects the needs of the people of this nation.

With a bit of luck, when I next return to Solomon Islands as a tourist, AFL and cricket will be thriving and the wonderful people of Solomon Islands will be increasingly benefitting from the impact of the partnership with RAMSI and the success of Operation Helpem Fren. B