



Solomons teachers talk transition



Tok tok...RAMSI's Deputy Special Coordinator, Mary Thurston and Solomon Islands Auditor-General, Edward Ronia addressed the Honiara teachers' Wakabaot TokTok meeting. *Photo: RAMSI*

If there is any group that could lay claim to the title of 'those who shape the minds of Solomon Islands', it is the nation's educators. So when a group of teachers from across Honiara recently came together to discuss the future of Solomon Islands, there was sure to be plenty of big ideas, as **TOM PERRY** from RAMSI Public Affairs reports.

Held at RAMSI Headquarters in Honiara, the meeting was part of an ongoing series of community discussion forums known as Wakabaot TokToks, designed to provide the opportunity for Solomon Islanders to come together with representatives from RAMSI and government to share their views on the current and future direction of their country.

Following a welcome from RAMSI's Community Outreach Coordinator, Chris Tarohimae, the teachers separated into groups to reflect on the changes they had seen in their nation since 2003.

Groups highlighted the return of law and order, the improvements to the Solomon Islands economy—such as increased international investment and improved revenue—and the improvements in the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) as key changes since 2003.

RAMSI's Deputy Special Coordinator, Mary Thurston, herself a former teacher, then addressed the group saying their comments reflected the sense that confidence was returning to Solomon Islands.

"Solomon Islands of 2011 is a very different nation from 2003," Thurston said. "There is more confidence in the country, the government and its institutions."

Thurston then turned to the topic of RAMSI's 'transition': the drawing down of RAMSI's resources from Solomon Islands.

"RAMSI has changed as Solomon Islands and its needs have changed," she said. "This change will continue."

"You may begin to see a little less of us...but that does not mean that RAMSI is leaving," she explained.

"We will still be here, but 'transition' is about giving Solomon Islanders more space to step up and take more of the lead."

Thurston also said the group—teachers from schools throughout the Solomons capital, Honiara—had a vital role to play in this process.

"As teachers you have a vital role. You are the ones that can help develop potential and build confidence in the young people who are the future leaders of Solomon Islands."

Following Thurston's remarks, Solomon Is-

lands Auditor-General, Edward Ronia, addressed the Wakabaot TokTok meeting by discussing the role of the Office of the Auditor-General and highlighting how far this office has come in recent years.

"Eight years ago, the Auditor-General's office was not functioning," he said. "There were no audits and public institutions did not produce accounts. There was no basic accountability across the Solomon Islands Government...and this played a big role in feeding corruption in this country."

"With RAMSI coming in to assist us, it's back up and running. Public accounts are now being audited and produced on-time, the backlog is reduced."

Crucial time: Ronia believes Solomon Islands was now heading into a crucial time in its history, which needed strong support at all levels. He urged the teachers at the meeting to get the message out to young people that corruption and culture should not go hand-in-hand.

"The work is improving everywhere," Ronia said. "But as a nation, we cannot afford to go back. We need to work together to ensure that when we don't have RAMSI, the good work still continues."

"In our culture, especially at election time, we have built the idea that 'if he helps me, I will help him', particularly with money. These practices are wrong; and they are damaging our country. And if we do not change, then it will be a very sad story for us all."

With Ronia's impassioned message in their minds, the teachers again split into groups to discuss what they believed were the key challenges facing the nation and how they could be addressed.

The first group of teachers, led by Adrian Masa from Betikama College, emphasised their belief that RAMSI's transition needed to be carefully handled to ensure it did not leave until the country was ready.

The group's attention also flagged the issue of corruption as a core challenge facing the nation. "It is good that it is being exposed now," Masa told the meeting.

"But it needs prosecution to end it, as the 'big

fish' are still doing it and getting away with it."

The group also listed the issue of unemployment as a fundamental challenge that needed urgent attention.

"Unemployment was one of the big reasons for the tensions," Masa told the meeting.

"We need the government to consider more income-generating projects, particularly in the provinces."

"If members of parliament have RCDF (rural constituency development funds), then they should use them to generate employment on the ground."

These thoughts were echoed by the second group, whose discussions were presented by Bemend Quanafia of Norman Palmer School.

"Corruption is a threat to our country," he said. "We have to deal with it at the top, and separate corruption from our culture; they should not be one and the same."

Quanafia added that investments should focus squarely on job creation.

"Any investment should be spent on creating work and training. Establishing technical schools to teach practical skills like building, electrical and carpentry would be an important step," he said.

With the floor open for comments, Johnson Kaua, a third year student teacher from Tamlan School said any 'draw-down' of RAMSI resources needed to be handled carefully.

"If RAMSI goes all at once, of course, there would be big problems," he said. "But the idea that the Deputy Special Coordinator raised—that RAMSI is still here but giving us more space to lead—is a good thing. It gives us the opportunity to build confidence, but with support."

However, Kaua's confidence was not shared by Alice Salebasi, a fellow teacher from Tamlan School, who said the fundamental issue of reconciliation needed to be addressed before Solomon Islanders could feel truly safe.

"Solomon Islanders think like elephants: we have a very long memory," she said. "The problems of the tensions will be remembered and the children of those involved may get involved."

In closing the meeting, RAMSI's Chris Tarohimae reminded teachers of their special role in helping build the strength of the nation.

"This is a Wakabaot TokTok meeting and as Christians, we talk about Jesus returning, but do actually walk about and prepare for it?"

"With RAMSI's transition, we need to prepare and take action, not just think about it. As teachers, you have a key role in helping young people and communities to prepare." **B**