



## A capacity building success story



The old and the new...the new Prisons Commandant William Aheia and Ian Brough at Rove Central Correctional Centre. Photo: RAMSI

When William Aheia recently took over as Commandant of Solomon Islands' largest correctional centre, he became the first Solomon Islander in nearly a decade to fill this position. **TOM PERRY** looks at how the Correctional Services with RAMSI's assistance has rebuilt, reformed and is now entirely led by Solomon Islanders.

In March this year, Ian Brough, an Australian RAMSI adviser who has worked in Solomon Islands for the past four years, formally handed over responsibility for the country's largest correctional centre to his colleague and new Commandant, William Aheia.

It marked a major milestone in the long process of strengthening Correctional Services Solomon Islands (formerly the Solomon Islands Prison Service), with Brough the very last RAMSI officer to hold an official government or 'in-line' position in Corrections.

During the worst period of civil and social unrest now known as The Tensions, Solomon Islanders were not able to count on the government to protect them, courts were sitting but the police could not—or in some cases, would not—enforce rulings and the prisons, especially Rove, the country's largest, had ceased to function. Prisoners were left to fend for themselves with many quietly returning to their villages and officers, who were rarely being paid, no longer reporting for duty.

As RAMSI's Participating Police Force officers began to enforce the rule of law, there was an urgent and overwhelming need for prisons. RAMSI had to move quickly to restore the basic functions of the prison system, so personnel were brought in to help fill almost all positions—from the Commissioner and Commandants down—and to rebuild what little correctional infrastructure remained.

These initial responses were successful and attention soon turned to the task of rebuilding the service into an organisation built on a strong vision, long-term strategic thinking and respect for staff and prisoners alike.

"Back in 2006, when I started in the Solomon Islands, the Prison Service had a very heavy focus on security," said Brough.

"It was in the very early stages of heading towards focussing more on rehabilitation, which has been an ongoing process of change over the past four or five years."

This changed treatment of prisoners, from 'prison as punishment' approach to one where the focus is on rehabilitation, has been a shift in attitude that has brought great benefits to Solomon Islands. The majority of prisoners will be re-released into the community," he explained.

"The correctional system has a responsibility to prepare each prisoner for this by addressing issues that put them into prison in the first place and providing them with skills to better serve their community, so that they don't return to the same behaviour."

He believes the Correctional officers—who work with prisoners on a daily basis—are now seeing the benefits of the new approach to working with prisoners.

"Correctional officers now see a rehabilitative role in what they do now, which has been a big change," Brough said.

"Most officers used to see their job as primarily 'locking up prisoners', whereas they now see it as 'locking up prisoners and making them better people'."

This is not, however, the only change Brough has seen in his time in Solomon Islands. The organisation which underwent a name change in 2006: the Solomon Islands Prison Service became Correctional Service Solomon Islands and is now heavily focussed on improving the way it manages prisoners and also the management systems at each of the country's five correctional centres.

Central to these improvements has been Brough's relationship with his counterpart, the newly sworn-in Commandant of Rove, Aheia. Brough believes the key component to their successful partnership has been in their ability

to recognise each other's strengths.

"The perception that I was here to teach William how to run a prison is wrong," explained Brough. "He's got 25 years in the prison service; he knows how to run a prison."

"Our relationship has not been one where I would lead and William would follow. Far from it. We would jointly share all the duties and responsibilities, and William would look after particular areas, and I would do others. And now, William leads on all of it."

Brough believes the idea that an international adviser can simply come in and 'show someone the ropes' is simplistic, and not reflective of the complexities of building capacity.

"I relied as much on William as he did on me. Particularly for the things that involve cultural, historical or operational elements—and these are constant in this job—William has a great background. I don't know the history, and I don't know why a particular process or policy was put in place in the past. And it is important to recognise and discuss these elements together."

Aheia believes while he has learnt a lot working alongside his RAMSI counterpart, the most important skills he has gained from his time with Brough are improved skills in management and the ability to think ahead.

"When we came together, I respected Ian because he knew a lot about the direction of the organisation and the direction we were all trying to get to. He understood what we wanted and what we are trying to put in place."

"And I am now, after two years working with Ian, a lot more focussed on setting goals and forward-thinking. Rather than just looking at the daily routine, I know I think a lot more strategically."

However, Brough stresses the process of 'handing over' is not as simple as shaking hands, finishing up, and walking away.

He expects to remain in Solomon Islands providing advice to Aheia, in the short-term at least. Beyond this, however, Brough is very confident in Aheia and his team.

"William is Commandant now, but he doesn't make the key decisions in isolation, he continues to use the Management Team—it's a strong consultative approach," he said. "It's about sharing the responsibility." B