



East Honiara chiefs talk transition



A Wakbaot TokTok session...with chiefs.

Chiefs and community leaders from throughout East Honiara came together recently as part of a series of community meetings organised by RAMSI focusing on creating greater community cooperation, and the important topic of RAMSI's eventual transition from Solomon Islands. **TOM PERRY** from RAMSI Public Affairs was there.

The term 'transition' refers to the idea that in the coming years, Solomon Islanders will begin to take over the work currently shared by Solomon Islanders and RAMSI as the mission gradually reduces in size and eventually departs Solomons' shores.

Community leaders taking part in the meeting, known as a Wakbaot TokTok were joined by senior Solomon Islands officials including the Ombudsman, Joe Porowai and Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) Deputy Commissioner, Edmond Sikua and RAMSI officials.

Following introductions, participants were separated into groups, each then shared their thoughts on RAMSI's 'transition', and what they thought it will mean for the people and Government of Solomon Islands. These discussions were active, lively—and occasionally passionate.

RAMSI Deputy Special Coordinator Justin Fepulea'i emphasised that any discussion of 'transition' needs to take into account of the Solomon Islands—RAMSI Partnership Framework that sets out the goals and targets guiding RAMSI's work in its partnership with Solomon Islands.

"The Partnership Framework is the 'work plan' for RAMSI's work with the Solomon Islands Government, and it will help RAMSI, the Solomon Islands Government and Pacific countries to eventually determine when the time is right for RAMSI to leave," Mr Fepulea'i said.

RAMSI's Deputy Development Coordinator, Kirsten Hawke, discussed with the group many of the achievements made in the Solomon Islands-RAMSI partnership, including in the strengthening of the country's court system, the significant improvements to the economy—and the various improvements to government systems and processes.

Acting Deputy Commissioner of the RSIPF, Edmond Sikua, said the nation's police force was undergoing a period of significant positive change, which needed strong community support.

"It is a very positive time for the RSIPF," he

explained. "Crime Prevention Committees are now being appointed in many locations, and Community Officers are being appointed in rural communities across Solomon Islands."

"We are going to have vehicles, new boats and there are many new houses now being built for officers throughout the country," he explained.

"In the next few months, we will also have the reconciliation of RSIPF members, which will recognise the difficult history we have gone through, and draw on the traditions of Solomon Islands. This will be important to the community gaining greater respect for the RSIPF as an organisation."

Meeting participants then presented their insights into the idea of 'transition', with a wide range of views shared.

"If we are now beginning to enter a transition phase for RAMSI's presence here, how do we measure RAMSI's work?" asked Joe Bruno, a community chief from Tuaruhu community.

"Every six months, the Solomon Islands Government/RAMSI Independent Experts Team reviews progress against the Partnership Framework," answered RAMSI's Deputy Special Coordinator, Justin Fepulea'i.

"They are currently working in the country, and they will report their findings back to the Solomon Islands Government and to the Pacific Islands Forum."

Fepulea'i added that the People's Survey, the survey of over 5000 Solomon Islanders undertaken each year, was another key component of measuring RAMSI's work.

Former Government Minister, Alfred Maetia, now a community leader from Honiara's Green Valley settlement, said the idea of RAMSI's eventual transition was concerning to him, as he felt that many issues needed long-term solutions, such as problems related to the tensions from 1998–2003.

"Even if RAMSI eventually leaves Solomon Islands, the name may go, and the scale may reduce, but we will not be alone," said RSIPF Assistant

Commissioner Sikua.

"There will still be support to our country—from other countries, other donors and other organisations."

RAMSI's Justin Fepulea'i agreed, and said that RAMSI's role in Solomon Islands was never about fixing all of the problems of the country, but was about creating space—and the environment—for the country, with the help of international donors to address many of these issues.

Faneta Sira, a church pastor from Burns Creek, said he was pleased to hear the economy was in a far better shape than compared to 2003, but he hadn't seen any changes or developments, despite there being more revenue available for government services.

Corruption, nepotism and malpractice were some of the other issues raised during the discussions. Clement Natei from Lunga community said he believed these were the biggest problems facing the nation.

While it was positive that the country's accountability institutions—the Office of the Auditor-General, the Leadership Code Commission and the Ombudsman's office—have been strengthened in recent years, he believed they were like dogs that could bark, but lacked strong bite.

"We can investigate and make recommendations to the various authorities, such as the Attorney-General and the police, but we cannot action them," explained Ombudsman, Joe Porowai.

"We would like to have more powers, we would like to be able to set up tribunals," he explained. "But at the moment—you are right—we can bark, but not bite."

Tuaruhu community's Joe Bruno commented that the issue of leadership should be an important part of any discussion about RAMSI's eventual transition. "Leadership is where it all begins," he said.

"And transition is a way to support Solomon Islanders to move forward and take the lead in our country's affairs. Identifying our problems, and where we do and don't have leadership is an important part of this."

His comments were echoed by Maetia who said now that the conversation about RAMSI's transition had commenced, Solomon Islanders needed to identify the problems that need to be dealt with independently.

"During this period of transition, "We need to ask ourselves 'Are we ready yet?'" **B**