



**'Operation *Helpem Fren*: Rebuilding the Nation of Solomon Islands':
Speech to National Security Conference**

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If you can, imagine a country where hospitals, schools and medical clinics have simply ceased to function for a lack of funds, imagine a nation where public servants go weeks without pay – not surprisingly, some turn up to work, but many do not – imagine roads that are literally falling apart, public thoroughfares that are the preserve of drunks and thieves. Then, to complete the picture, add to the mix guns, ethnic tensions, rogue police, corrupt politicians and business people, and armed criminals.

This is the nation that greeted RAMSI in the early hours of 24 July last year when the first elements of an Australian-led, Pacific peacemaking and nation building operation began arriving in Solomon Islands.

Eight months later, that nation no longer exists.

The Government's loss of control was widely acknowledged at this time by the Prime Minister, Sir Allan Kemakeza, his senior Cabinet Ministers, public servants and even people on the street, who knew full well that a small group of armed thugs and their cohorts within the police held as much, or more, power than elected representatives.

Looking for a way out, the Prime Minister made the request for external intervention, a request that was subsequently sanctioned by a unanimous vote of the Solomon Islands Parliament. Significantly, RAMSI also received the full support of the Pacific Islands Forum.

The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, or RAMSI as it is now widely known, has, in its first eight months, already achieved much of what we set out to do.

Solomon Islanders can now move freely and without fear through the breadth of their quite stunningly beautiful country. Slowly, public finances, free from extortion and insidious demands for "compensation", are stabilising, and basic services are gradually being restored to the people. Public servants are getting paid on time, the sick are being treated, children are back at school; and a new sense of purpose is apparent in the life of the nation.

So how did we do it?

On our arrival RAMSI's civilian, police and military leaders laid out the framework of Operation *Helpem Fren* to the Prime Minister, his Cabinet, the Opposition, the police and most importantly the people of Solomon Islands. Comprehensive engagement of these individuals and groups and the gaining of their support was critical.

We would do this by working together as friends and partners to restore law and order, before beginning the long task of assisting Solomon Islands to rebuild its machinery of government and reform the economy. Most importantly we assured all stakeholders, this was a long-term commitment from the friends of Solomon Islands throughout the Pacific, which would not cease until the job was done in a full and sustainable way.

Driving the operation would be our conviction that for too long Solomon Islanders had suffered at the hands of a small number of militants and criminals who had terrorised the society and brought the country to its knees. We would not hesitate to use our potent military forces if RAMSI personnel were threatened or attacked.

From Australia's perspective, intervening to ensure Solomon Islands did not descend into chaos was now an imperative. Plainly, a dysfunctional Solomon Islands held long term dangers for Australia and the region. A country beholden to armed thugs is a recipe for chronic instability. Such instability is an open invitation to transnational crime. Experience elsewhere shows that weak states are also attractive as havens for money laundering, people smuggling, drug smuggling and terrorism. And while there was no evidence that transnational criminals were targeting Solomon Islands, there was no point waiting for this to happen.

RAMSI's Mandate

In the end, all it took was the decision to do it, and the deployment of about 300 police officers, backed 1700 military personnel, from nine regional countries (Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, PNG, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Kiribati, and Cook Islands). RAMSI in this first vital phase was a police led operation, with the military playing a support role, providing protection and logistical assistance, but also helping to build a crucial environment of compliance.

The task of the police was to immediately establish law and order in Honiara, working closely with the Royal Solomon Island Police. On the day of RAMSI's arrival in Solomon Islands the Prime Minister was provided with Close Personal Protection by RAMSI police and key government buildings and installations were placed under armed guard. This immediately lifted the threat that had hung over the Government since the coup of June 2000. Similarly the Commander of RAMSI's Participating Police Force, Ben McDevitt, an Assistant Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police, was appointed Deputy Commissioner of RSIP and given responsibility for three important functions: the collection of weapons; resolving the conflict on the Weathercoast of Guadalcanal Island; and internal discipline of RSIP.

Early Successes

In the first months of RAMSI's operation, there were four key early successes, which I'd like to outline.

In planning the operation, it was decided that the **first priority would be to disarm the militants**, who retained high-powered weapons taken from police armouries during the so-called "ethnic tensions".

In the first week of Operation *Helpem Fren* we announced a nationwide gun amnesty with the endorsement of the government that would run for three weeks throughout the country. All guns were to be handed in, without exception. This included all police weapons.

A public information campaign across the country which included visits to hundreds of towns and villages by plane, helicopter and ship helped spread the word, as did a radio and newspaper

campaign run by the Government's intervention taskforce. We also worked very closely with the National Peace Council, ably led by former Speaker of Parliament, Paul Tovua.

As a result, more than 3700 guns, including about 700 high-powered military-style weapons, were ultimately collected.

The destruction of weapons was a very public affair. Rather than containing weapons, RAMSI decided to cut them up in front of the on looking crowd – including those who had just surrendered them - in a potent display of our commitment to ridding the nation of firearms.

Obviously, not all weapons were handed in; we have information to suggest that militants have cached some weapons, including high-powered ones. Over time, some of these will be recovered. Many will stay in the ground forever. Most importantly, many of those most likely to use such weapons have already been arrested for serious crimes and will likely face lengthy prison terms.

It is indisputable that the collection of such a large number of weapons has given the country a massive confidence boost. There have been no reports of militants or anyone else brandishing weapons and intimidating people. We are now working hard to ensure that this is a permanent change to life in Solomons.

A second early success of *Helpem Fren* was the surrender of the Weathercoast militant leader, Harold Keke on Guadalcanal's remote southern shores.

Resolving the Weathercoast conflict was a key objective for RAMSI. Without pacifying Keke and his followers, we could not hope to restore law and order.

The ongoing conflict was a hangover from the ethnic tension of 1999-2001, and was a key factor preventing Solomon Islands from moving forward. Keke and a group of followers, who had formed the Guadalcanal Liberation Front, had failed to sign the Townsville Peace Agreement in 2000. Keke's behaviour was erratic and unpredictable. Just before our arrival seven Anglican brothers from the order of Melanesian Brothers who had been taken hostage by Keke's followers in May, were killed.

Two weeks after we arrived in Solomon Islands, Harold Keke agreed to meet us for talks. These were held at a village in the heart of GLF territory. Ben McDevitt and I told Keke that the time had come to end the conflict. We acknowledged that his group may have had grievances, but that these were now best pursued through legal processes. He would have a chance to tell his side of the story in court. McDevitt explained that there was an outstanding warrant for Keke's arrest and he would have to give himself up at some stage. After three meetings in quick succession, Keke and his three key commanders surrendered to RAMSI and were flown to a secure location in Honiara where they were charged with a series of murders, including the deaths of the Melanesian Brothers.

Keke's surrender was a key milestone in RAMSI's operations. Other militants and police had used his belligerency as a justification for holding onto weapons. After his arrest, there were no more excuses. Keke's arrest was another major confidence boost for the whole country, especially on Guadalcanal where many had lived in fear of his raids. Coming so early in our deployment, it was also a useful means of defusing suggestions that RAMSI was an anti-Malaitan operation, purely targeted at the ethnic group responsible for the 2000 coup.

A third area of success was dealing with the former militants, many of whom had become gangsters.

These were the people who stood to lose most from the intervention, and who, in our assessment, were most likely to take violent action against RAMSI or the Government.

Because of the purely criminal nature of most of their activities, it was decided that we would approach the former militants as a policing issue. After we arrived, teams of RAMSI police investigators were formed to investigate the many crimes that had been committed in recent years, mostly by former militants. These investigations were conducted quickly, but without fanfare.

In these first few weeks, when we were asking militants to hand back weapons, we announced publicly that we were prepared to meet and talk to any of the militants, at any time, anywhere. Some Solomon Islanders saw this as a sign of weakness. They wanted arrests, not discussions, and were afraid that we would make compromises with those they feared the most. That was not our intention, and I explained at the time that RAMSI would not negotiate, or compromise or do any deals. Ben McDevitt and I and Colonel John Frewen, the then RAMSI military commander, travelled to Malaita to talk to the former commanders of the Malaitan Eagle Force as we had talked to other militants on Guadalcanal. Our aim was to explain the objectives of the operation, to outline the strength of our military and police forces and make clear the strength of our resolve.

So far RAMSI has arrested over 50 former militants. Most have been arrested for violent crimes against people - mass murder, murder, abduction, rape and robbery.

The final area of success I'd like to point to, is the progress we've made in cleaning up the Solomon Islands Police Force.

For a long time the RSIP was a big part of the problem. During the ethnic tensions, the police distributed weapons from the RSIP armoury to the militants. After the Townsville Peace Agreement the requirement for these men to disarm was circumvented by recruiting them as "special constables". These "specials" had become something of a private army for those demanding money from the government, a menace deployed to threaten violence and force payment as required.

Many senior RSIP officers had also been promoted well beyond their capabilities and in defiance of their undisciplined actions as police officers. Some had taken to intimidation and violence for personal financial gain. Others were using the lack of law and order to siphon off funds on a very regular basis. Recent investigations have shown that between 2002 and 2003 alone, more than SBD\$55 million (\$8.5 million) has been paid out in unauthorised "allowances" and other illegal payments by senior police officers.

Simply, the force needed a major overhaul and a thorough clean up.

Since July 2003, over 50 RSIP members have been arrested and over 400 have been sacked. Both Deputy Commissioners have been arrested for fraud and abuse of office. Two of the most senior officers in the paramilitary division have been arrested. This Special Tasks and Rescue or STAR Division that as the Police Field Force had played such a central role in the 2000 coup had, left unchecked, become like a feared and ill-disciplined private gang. The RSIP was effectively disarmed in the first few weeks of the operation and the infamous STAR Division disbanded.

RAMSI police have put a high priority on internal investigations to clean up the force, with RAMSI officers working there alongside RSIP officers. The number of current files has grown from 17 in July 2003 to over 400 in March 2004. Systems for disciplinary action have been re-instated.

Proper systems of recruitment have also been instituted to stop the recruitment of “wantoks”, which has become a frequent problem undermining any attempts at merit-based recruitment.

As Ben McDevitt likes to say: “The RSIP has become a force more difficult to get into, but a force easier to get thrown out of”.

The RAMSI agenda for 2004 looks quite different to that of 2003.

The focus of RAMSI in 2004 has moved onto longer-term nation-building issues. Policing issues remain very important, but the top priority is now the rebuilding of RSIP into a functional, well trained and disciplined police force that can gain and maintain the trust and respect of the population - that will take many years. Management training for senior police officers is about to start, a new diploma course in policing is being devised in conjunction with the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education. In short a whole new ethic is being created for what will be a very different force.

This process is being guided by a strategic review into the RSIP, with 15 terms of reference covering everything from human resources issues, to whether the RSIP will be an armed force, to how the fire services will be handled. Every aspect of policing will be put under the microscope. The strategic review will provide the roadmap for rebuilding the force over the next five to eight years. RAMSI police will remain in Solomon Islands until this task is completed.

The nation-building component of RAMSI now consists of about 80 civilian personnel, many of them drawn from ten Australian Government Departments and agencies. Their role is to repair the damage done to the essential machinery of government over recent years. Advisers have been placed throughout the justice system to strengthen the country’s ability to deal with the large number of arrests going through the court and prison systems. There are also advisers in the Ministry of Finance, helping Government regain control of expenditure and improve tax collection. Initially many of these advisers have stepped into in-line positions to get the bureaucracy functioning again. But over time they will be training up their counterparts to take on these functions to ensure the change in practices is sustained and sustainable.

Crucial to the future of the Solomon Islands is bringing about much needed economic reform. Resuscitating the economy will require foreign and local investment if economic growth and jobs are to return to the country. This in turn requires regulatory reform, taxation reform, restructuring of state-owned enterprises and reform of the financial sector to ensure stability and credit to business and consumers.

We – and by “we” I mean the partnership between Solomon Islanders and RAMSI - desperately need to get the public service functioning again. Public sector reform is required to get the Government delivering services. Cabinet and parliamentary processes require review and updating.

We need to make sure that the watchdog bodies are strengthened, to prevent the re-emergence of corruption. We’ll be looking to restructure and bolster institutions such as the Leadership Code Commission, Ombudsman and Auditor General, and a high level mission at the end of this month will investigate the possible need for some form of independent commission with wide powers.

We need to consolidate the early assistance to the justice system. RAMSI has already brought in magistrates, public solicitors and public prosecutors to ensure that the justice system can cope with the large number of arrests and trials. We have completed a new high security prison in

Honiara and we have strengthened the prison service with prison shift advisers and a new Controller of Prisons.

As the potential threat to RAMSI personnel declines, we are gradually drawing down our military presence. From a peak of 1,700 personnel, military numbers have fallen to about 700. From four companies of infantry we now have only one enlarged Pacific Island company. When we judge the threat to be sufficiently reduced, RAMSI will recommend to contributing Governments that the infantry company and its support elements depart. The logistic support elements of the RAMSI military are also being gradually drawn down as commercial arrangements are put in place.

So why has it worked?

The answer to this is deceptively simple. RAMSI has been a success because it was the right plan at the right time and we had the right team with the right approach with the right level of political backing and resources.

On the ground in Solomons and in Australia, and indeed in the broader Pacific Island region, there was overwhelming political and moral support for an intervention. The plan to respond positively and comprehensively to Solomon Islands request for intervention came together very quickly in Canberra before RAMSI was deployed. This was due to several factors.

First, the watershed in Australian foreign policy, which accompanied the decision to intervene at the Solomon Islands invitation, ensured a high degree of political support and funding for the operation.

The relative compactness of the Australian system meant that the key participants already knew each other well and many had worked together before. (Ben McDevitt and I were working together on counter-terrorism before we were sent to Solomon Islands.) AFP, Defence, DFAT and AusAID, working closely with the intelligence agencies, had a very good understanding of the problems in Solomons. The planning sessions in the two weeks before mobilisation went smoothly and without bureaucratic battles or differences of approach. It really was a team effort.

It was also right to focus initially on a police-led operation, but one supported by a sizeable military force. Infantry forces deterred a military-style response to RAMSI's deployment and operations. Reporting before the operation and in the early months showed that there was a possibility of such a response. To have deployed with only a token military presence would have been to invite sceptical militants who were feeling threatened to take on RAMSI, hoping to destabilise the mission. Instead, the size and capability of the RAMSI military force got their attention and helped convince them of the need to co-operate.

The intervention also came at the right time. RAMSI arrived with overwhelming political and, crucially, public support in Solomon Islands. Had an intervention force been mobilised in 2000 at the time of the coup and in the middle of the ethnic tensions, I don't believe that it would have had such broad-based public support. And we would have risked being accused of taking sides. By mid-2003 the conflict had reached an intolerable "mutually hurting stalemate", with ordinary folk on all sides having come to the view that no one side could prevail and that their country was on the verge of collapse. There was a strong sense of resentment against the tiny band of criminal thugs who persisted in holding the country to ransom and a police force that at best was unable and unwilling to do anything about it, but at worst included some officers who were actively colluding in the country's woes. The conflict was "ripe" for an intervention supported by the general populous.

We also had the right team. Agencies in Canberra nominated their best people to the operation, and the teamwork between DFAT, AFP, Defence, AusAID, Finance, Treasury and the various intelligence organisations has been superb. Australians can be - should be - proud of the job their police, military and civilian personnel have done in Solomon Islands, often in difficult and dangerous circumstances.

Significantly, the intervention also received the full backing of the Pacific Islands Forum, most of whose member states have sent police and/or military to be part of RAMSI. Without the strong support and involvement of the countries of the region RAMSI would not have had the success it has had, nor would it have come with and retained the overwhelming support of the people of Solomon Islands. I would like today to pay special tribute to the men and women of the Pacific Island police and military forces who have served in RAMSI with such professionalism and distinction.

And our approach has also been shown to be the right one. This was, of course, an intervention, but it was also intervention by invitation. RAMSI is engaged in a partnership with the Government, Parliament and the people of Solomon Islands. Decisions are taken together, after discussion. We have worked hard to keep Solomon Islanders informed about RAMSI activities and plans, building consensus, bringing Solomon Islanders along on each step of this unique operation.

RAMSI's ability to achieve quick results has also benefited greatly from the agreement with Solomon Islands to give RAMSI personnel the same powers as their Solomon Islander counterparts. This meant that RAMSI police were not just advisers, but could conduct investigations and make arrests.

About half of the RAMSI advisers in the Ministry of Finance have in-line powers, enabling them to quickly stabilise the budget through tough expenditure control measures and increase revenue through clamping down on tax evasion.

In-line powers were vital to our ability to ensure that the justice system functions effectively in the short term, while being strengthened in the long term. A lesson from RAMSI is that these powers were crucial in achieving the fast turn-around in law and order and public finances.

What next?

In July last year, after just 25 years of independence, Solomon Islands was on the verge of becoming a "failed state".

As Prime Minister Howard said in December last year during a visit to Honiara, "RAMSI will remain until the job is done". And while we have made extraordinary progress in the short time we have been in Solomon Islands, the job is not yet done; far from it.

While law and order has returned to Solomon Islands, the situation is not yet one from which RAMSI could walk away tomorrow and feel confident that all that we have achieved would remain in place.

The process of rebuilding the institutions of government (including the police) and of economic reform have only just begun. Much work remains to weed out corruption, which had become endemic in Solomon Islands. In any country these are difficult tasks, requiring hard – and sometimes unpopular – decisions to be made by government.

Solomon Islanders also need to take the lead on fundamental long term issues such as land reform, economic development and political and social issues. We have provided a secure environment with a functioning government and economy, so that Solomon Islanders can work through these issues.

Solomon Islanders, having seen their country and their lives torn apart by years of conflict, now understand that these reforms will bring them a better life, a safer life and a more prosperous life. That is what we promised them the day we arrived. We have pledged to stay until those changes are entrenched.