

**Address by the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands
and Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum,
The Honourable Henry Puna**

**Celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands,
24 July 2013.**

Your Excellency, the Governor General of the Solomon Islands, Sir Frank Kabui,
The Honourable Prime Minister of the Islands, Honourable Gordon Darcy Lilo,
Your Excellencies, Forum Leaders and their representatives,
Honourable Ministers and Members of Parliament,
Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Distinguished Representatives of Development Partners,
Representatives of Regional and International Organisations,
Members of the Clergy,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Oketa baratas and sistas lo Solomons.

Gud Morning, mi barava hapi tumas and honoured for come and sanap lo front lo u fala today.

Today marks a significant and historic day for the people and government of the Solomon Islands, as well as for the Pacific region. We celebrate today a decade of steadfast partnership and cooperation between the governments of the Solomon Islands and the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands in true Pacific spirit – encapsulated in two simple words, and indeed the motto of RAMSI: *Helpem Fren*.

We are extremely honoured to be here today to celebrate with you the joint achievements and progress made by the Solomon Islands and RAMSI since 24 July 2003. It is also an opportunity to celebrate ten years of Pacific-wide support to the Solomon Islands, and of strengthened cooperation and friendship amongst our Pacific nations under the auspices of RAMSI.

One of the strengths of RAMSI has been that regardless of size or levels of development, all Pacific Islands Forum countries have and continue to contribute towards the work of RAMSI, including my own country, the Cook Islands. Irrespective of size, and the circumstances of our resources, it was important to us that we demonstrate our commitment to principles of peace and stability, and to help others in need. RAMSI has been, without a doubt, a true regional exercise in solidarity and a shining example of regionalism. Guided by the Biketawa Declaration, which was adopted by Forum Leaders in 2000 to provide a mechanism for collective regional action to address security threats to Forum members, RAMSI is an exemplary model and demonstration of what can be achieved through well calibrated and collective response, skills and abilities of our Pacific peoples, and cooperative spirit of the Pacific region. As Chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, I am extremely proud yet humbled by the goodwill and ready support provided by all members of the Pacific Islands Forum to a neighbour and friend in need. RAMSI has brought us closer together, as friends.

Excellencies,

Thank you for your continued commitment and spirit of solidarity and cooperation provided to the Solomon Islands and RAMSI. Notwithstanding our respective national circumstances and limited domestic resources, particularly in the case of Smaller Island States, I am pleased to note this did not prevent your country's contribution to the work of RAMSI. I would like to thank in particular the Governments of Australia and New Zealand for their leadership and ongoing financial contributions to RAMSI, including the generous and substantial commitment of AUD500 million by the Government of Australia as continued funding for RAMSI and its successor programmes from 2013 to 2017. Thank you indeed for this generous contribution and commitment in ensuring lasting benefits for the people of the Solomon Islands.

I wish to especially thank and pay tribute to the thousands of police, military and civilian personnel from across the region that have and continue to serve with RAMSI, and who have worked side by side with the people of the Solomon Islands.

We offer you our sincere gratitude and appreciation for undertaking your responsibilities with dedication, pride, professionalism, and humility. Your contribution to RAMSI reflects the commitment made by all Forum island nations, and you brought to life the human aspect of the partnership between RAMSI and the people and government of the Solomon Islands. Thank you for honouring your countries and your service in the name of the Forum.

RAMSI stands for the people of the Solomon Islands and I express grateful appreciation and gratitude for the widespread support for RAMSI by the people of the Solomon Islands. That we are here today to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of RAMSI, including the joint successes of the mission, is due in no small part to the support and cooperation of the people of the Solomon Islands.

Solomon Islands has come a long way in the last ten years. While we celebrate today the achievements of the regional assistance mission, we should not forget that today also marks the arrival of RAMSI following a period of conflict and civil unrest in the Solomon Islands. It is therefore incumbent on all of us to do our utmost to ensure the sustainability of this hard-won peace and progress.

Some of us in the Pacific – the Cook Islands included – know of no such hardship or struggle. So it is with deep sincerity that I applaud you all here today for your spirit and conviction to rise above and succeed.

Within the last ten years, we have seen the restoration of law and order; surrender of arms by militant groups; arrest and prosecution of human rights offenders; rebuilding of key machineries and institutions of government; reform of civilian development programmes; and the progression of RAMSI's focus from maintaining law and order, to building and strengthening local capacities. With RAMSI's assistance, we have seen a reduction of the national debt from 2011 to 2012, and the real GDP growth in 2012 of 5.5%, noting also that real GDP growth is also projected for 2013 and 2014 despite a generally weak global economic environment. I offer warm congratulations to the Government of Solomon Islands and RAMSI on these considerable achievements.

In addition to these milestones, the Solomon Islands in recent years successfully hosted several major regional and international events, including the two-week long Pacific Arts Festival in 2012, which, by all accounts, has set the benchmark for future festivals. These are significant achievements by any standards, but even more so for a country that only a decade ago was faced with considerable challenges to peace, stability, and economic growth.

The challenge for us today is to ensure that we maintain and build on this peace and progress. Commencing this month, RAMSI is in the final stages of withdrawing its military component while transitioning its development programmes to bilateral arrangements. The drawdown of the military component of RAMSI is an indication of confidence in the stability of the local security situation, as well as the ability of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force in maintaining law and order.

The RAMSI Participating Police Force will continue to work in the Solomon Islands for the next four years to support their local counterparts. While I am fully confident that the Solomon Islands has and will continue to develop capacities to manage the domestic security environment, RAMSI's Participating Police Force will also be on hand to provide necessary support.

A key aspect to ensuring enduring peace and security in the Solomon Islands is to acknowledge the root causes of the conflict that hurt so many families across this country. At the 7th meeting of the Forum Ministerial Standing Committee on RAMSI in May this year, the Honourable Rick Hou, Acting Prime Minister and Minister for Finance Solomon Islands noted in his address to the Ministers that it was important to address the causes of the ethnic tensions and to take appropriate action to resolve those outstanding issues, noting that there were pending security and ethnic tension-related issues that would be better addressed by the Solomon Islands government with the support of development partners. We note that there are concerns and challenges in this work, and we will continue to work closely with the people and Government of the Solomon Islands in this regard.

Excellencies,

On your behalf, I wish to acknowledge with much appreciation the oversight and guidance of the Forum Ministerial Standing Committee (FMSC) and the Enhanced Consultative Mechanism (ECM) on RAMSI, with the support of the Forum Secretariat. The Forum Ministerial Standing Committee and the Enhanced Consultative Mechanism have provided opportunities for frank discussions and reflections on the work of the RAMSI in partnership with the Solomon Islands government and all Forum contributing countries, and has contributed to fostering better understanding and sustainability of such relationships. Peace and security in our respective member countries are inextricably linked to peace and stability at the regional level.

This is our commitment to the Forum and each of us has the responsibility to ensure the sustainability of this partnership for the benefit of the peoples of our Pacific.

Tank yu tumas.