

RAMSI 13th Anniversary Celebrations
Speech by RAMSI Special Coordinator Quinton Devlin
Yam Cultural Festival Village, Small Malaita
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E&OE

Today is RAMSI's birthday and it is a great honour to be here to celebrate our 13th anniversary with the people of Small Malaita and visitors to the Yam Cultural Festival.

Today, exactly 13 years ago, just after dawn, the first RAMSI police, soldiers and civilians from eventually 15 countries began arriving at Henderson International Airport on 24 July 2003. We came at the request of the Solomon Islands Government and with the authorisation of the 16 Leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum to help a friend (*helpem fren*). Our task was to work collaboratively with national governments, provincial governments and the people of Solomon Islands to end the violence and re-start the national institutions of a shattered nation.

Much has changed in the last 13 years. This country has transformed itself from near-collapse to a peaceful nation that can now stand confidently on its own, backed by a much stronger police force.

Law and order exists across the archipelago, helped by the removal of guns from the community and the arrest of thousands of militants in the early months of RAMSI. And law and order has been supported by 13 years of the re-building of the police force – the nation's first line of defence against a return to conflict. The economy is stable, businesses are creating jobs and public servants are paid so schools, hospitals and other public services are growing stronger by the day.

I doubt that many of the men, women and *pikinini* that came to watch RAMSI arrive on 24 July 2003 could have imagined that Solomon Islands would have regained so quickly the ground it lost during the Tensions period. Every Solomon Islander should be proud of the enormous progress that has been achieved in just 13 short years. RAMSI is certainly proud of the role it played in helping to re-start this nation.

But now it is important to understand that the security of this country is in the hands of Solomon Islanders. Every individual should think personally about how they can contribute to the peace and prosperity of this country. Peace and

prosperity should not be just something uttered on the Sabbath or sung as part of the national anthem, it should be pursued actively during the week too – as individuals, as communities, as a province, and as a nation.

I therefore humbly ask community leaders and the people of Solomon Islands to continue the work that RAMSI started – to work in partnership with the police to prevent crime and continue to protect people and property. Only with such partnership can peace reign and development occur.

And what I see gives me great optimism. Communities are working with police, for example, to remove kawso stills and marijuana plantations, and to protect people at major events.

I agree with previous speakers that RAMSI's mission will be complete when we will leave in 11 months - on 30 June 2017 - as agreed three years ago by the national government and RAMSI.

This means that this is the last anniversary that RAMSI will celebrate in Solomon Islands. So there is a hint of sadness surrounding today's event; but mostly joy because our departure is a good news story for the nation.

It means that the national government and RAMSI are confident that this nation is ready to stand up and stand alone. It means the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF), in particular, is ready to resume full responsibility for policing and national security. And it means it is time for policing support from the Pacific region to normalise. It means RAMSI is no longer needed.

I agree that this is a 'tick in the box', an opportunity and a vote of confidence in Solomon Islands.

Of course, this day has been coming for many years - underwritten by the hard work of governments, community leaders and a desire for peace in the hearts of ordinary Solomon Islanders. It has not always been an easy path and, of course, there is still more to be done to heal past wounds, build the nation further and tackle issues such as alcohol abuse, family violence and land and resource disputes that hold back the nation from achieving its full potential.

This Yam Cultural Festival is itself a clear manifestation of how far Solomon Islands has progressed. It is wonderful to see Solomon Islanders moving freely between provinces. It is wonderful to see the emergence of clever and innovative events like this Festival, which showcase rural areas and unique cultures, and improve economic livelihoods outside provincial capitals.

In this context, I would like to thank the Member of Parliament for Small Malaita, Hon. Rick Hou, and the Festival Organising Committee for inviting RAMSI to be part of this special event and for allowing us to share our anniversary celebrations with the opening of the Festival

I also encourage you, the people of this region and Festival visitors, to search out over the next few days the RAMSI officials - led by Assistant Special Coordinator Masi Lomaloma - who will be working alongside the RSIPF Community Policing team to talk with Festival goers about RAMSI's drawdown, preparations for our departure, and a variety of policing issues.

Over the years, as the Solomon Islands Government and RSIPF have taken steps forward, RAMSI has been deliberately stepping back from frontline duties. We have not had, for example, a day-to-day operational role here in Malaita since 2013 and the last Auki-based police advisers left in September last year. We continue, however, to support the local police, including through ongoing training and advisory support and through things such as the police boat that is moored in the harbour, which we launched in Auki earlier this year.

The last major piece of the jigsaw in terms of preparing the RSIPF for RAMSI's departure is the limited rearmament of the police. RAMSI is helping the Government to implement its plan to rearm a limited number of carefully-selected and highly-trained officers so the RSIPF can protect the nation's communities, borders and waters. Once re-armed, the RSIPF will have the full suite of equipment, skills and training to do its job independently, professionally and safely.

RAMSI will say farewell to the people of Solomon Islands in Honiara in June next year. But I want to assure you that just because RAMSI is finishing, it does not mean that RAMSI contributing nations will be walking away. The Australian and New Zealand governments are, for example, already in detailed discussions with the national government about further security support and follow-on programs of bilateral policing assistance.

The Pacific region came to the rescue of Solomon Islands 13 years ago and the 15 RAMSI contributing nation will always be friends of this country and its people.

To conclude, I would like to thank you very much for celebrating RAMSI's birthday with us. I wish you a very successful Yam Cultural Festival and, as the national anthem states, joy, peace, progress and prosperity.

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