



How is RAMSI faring? Progress, challenges, and lessons learned

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by **Elsina Wainwright**

On 24 July 2003, the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) deployed at the request of the Solomon Islands Government. RAMSI marked the first step of a pronounced shift in the Australian Government's policy towards the South Pacific, to one of increased engagement in the region.

Over 20 months have since elapsed, and much has changed in Solomon Islands. This paper will analyse RAMSI's progress,

the challenges that lie ahead, and what lessons might be learned.

The deployment of RAMSI¹

In the months leading up to the deployment of RAMSI, Solomon Islands had ceased to function as an effective state. It was paralysed by a political and security crisis, in which armed criminal gangs held the rest of the society to ransom. In April 2003 Solomon Islands Prime Minister Sir



Members from the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands visit the remote Dai Island, 50 kilometres north of Malaita, to outline the role of RAMSI, October 13, 2003. © Defence Department

Allan Kemakeza wrote to Australian Prime Minister John Howard requesting assistance to combat the crisis.

It took just three months from the dispatch of this letter of request for RAMSI to be deployed. To devise and roll out such an operation in a short space of time was no small task. Over 2,000 police, military and development advisers from Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Fiji² arrived in Solomon Islands with little more than a blueprint to be fleshed out as they went.

The blueprint contained several key objectives: to restore security, to assist with governance and economic reform, and to help rebuild Solomon Islands' institutions. RAMSI was to be a comprehensive statebuilding operation with several phases, and the restoration of law and order and budgetary stabilisation were judged to be the most urgent tasks to be performed in phase one. The goal after security was restored was to provide Solomon Islands with the institutions and expertise required for it to function as an effective state.

RAMSI was to have multiple elements, including law and justice, financial, and economic assistance. Accordingly it drew in a number of Australian agencies. RAMSI personnel were to be placed in line positions and advisory roles in Solomon Islands agencies, and a civilian Special Coordinator was appointed to oversee the entire operation.

From the outset, RAMSI had several noteworthy features. First, the restoration of law and order was recognised as only the initial—and not the most demanding—phase of a much longer project to help build effective institutions of governance in Solomon Islands. Accordingly, the Australian Government declared that the mission represented a long-term commitment

on Australia's part, in the order of five to ten years.

Second, the mission was police-led: the restoration of law and order was judged to be a primarily police, not military, task. Around 300 police—200 of them Australian—were deployed to Solomon Islands to fulfil this task, which required that weapons be removed from the militias and the community and that the militias and criminal gangs be 'neutralised'. A large military contingent was deployed to provide logistical support and protection to the police; the bulk of this contingent has since been withdrawn.

The third notable feature of RAMSI was the element of consent: it took place at the request of the Solomon Islands Government and with the unanimous approval of the Solomon Islands Parliament. It also enjoyed the support of the vast majority of the Solomon Islands population. And fourth, the mission was endorsed by the regional body: the meeting of Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Foreign Ministers in June 2003 placed the operation within the parameters of the Forum's Biketawa Declaration, which provides for a collective response to a crisis. RAMSI also involved regional participation: five PIF member states provided personnel when the operation began, and in all eleven PIF member states have participated.

Within weeks of the deployment, RAMSI proved to be an effective circuit breaker to the lawlessness in Solomon Islands.

How RAMSI is faring

Thus far, the intervention in Solomon Islands has had a number of important successes. Within weeks of the deployment, RAMSI

proved to be an effective circuit breaker to the lawlessness in Solomon Islands. The rapid restoration of law and order took even RAMSI personnel by surprise. Children and teachers went back to schools, stolen property was returned in Honiara, and construction recommenced in the capital. The sense of security has largely endured; more than 3,700 weapons have been recovered and over 4,000 arrests have been made.

RAMSI's budgetary stabilisation program also achieved significant results. A workable budget was put in place and ghosts were removed from the payroll. The Solomon Islands Government's debt was managed down, revenue compliance increased, and police, teachers and other public servants were soon being paid on time.

Phase two, throughout 2004, focused on the consolidation of the rule of law, the beginnings of institutional reform, and measures to revive the economy. RAMSI has made considerable progress in cleaning up the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP). Approximately 25 per cent of the force has been removed—around 400 officers—and 88 of those officers (including two deputy commissioners) have been arrested and charged with corruption, murder or serious criminality. And the RSIP's paramilitary division, which played a key part in the coup in 2000, has been disbanded.

The role of the RAMSI Participating Police Force (PPF) has included joint patrols and community policing with the RSIP, guarding and security services, and the pursuit of criminal investigations. A strategic review has been conducted of the RSIP, and there were 30 new recruits into the force last year.

RAMSI has also been providing support to the justice and prisons systems, including the construction of facilities. Twenty-one legal experts are performing roles such as that of the Solicitor General and the Public

Solicitor, as well as serving as magistrates and prosecutors.

In addition, advisers have also been working with the Solomon Islands Government on an economic reform program to encourage the growth of investment and the private sector. Since RAMSI's arrival, Solomon Islands has again recorded positive economic growth. Work is also being done to improve the machinery of government, including Cabinet processes, the public service, parliament, and electoral systems. RAMSI is seeking to improve accountability and transparency in government, and to build up anti-corruption institutions such as the Ombudsman and the Auditor General.

Phase three of the mission has commenced this year. While there is some overlap between phases two and three, phase three is characterised more by moves towards sustainability and self-reliance. The emphasis is on capacity building and training, as well as bedding down systems and reform measures. For example, the RSIP is now doing more of the day to day policing, while the PPF is focusing on training and mentoring the RSIP, advising on RSIP investigations, and targeting corruption.

The 'tension trials' are an integral part of the consolidation of the rule of law in Solomon Islands.

The PPF-RSIP Joint Corruption Targeting Task Force has already had some results, with the arrests of a couple of Solomon Islands Ministers and some other senior figures. The first of the ethnic tension-related trials has recently wound up, with life sentences for former Weathercoast warlord Harold Keke and two associates for the murder of a Member of Parliament. Keke's trial was a potentially turbulent event, but it has proved



A combined patrol of Australian and Solomon Islands police on duty in the Solomon Islands capital of Honiara, July 24, 2003. AP via AAP/Rick Rycroft © 2003 The Associated Press.

to be cathartic. The ‘tension trials’ are an integral part of the consolidation of the rule of law in Solomon Islands.

But for all this progress, there have been setbacks. The December 22 sniper murder of an Australian Protective Service officer (which followed another sniper attack a few months earlier) demonstrated all too starkly that some security issues persist. It also showed there are Solomon Islanders who resent RAMSI—primarily those who have lost a lot and have more to lose from its presence.³

Furthermore, some voices of complaint have been raised against RAMSI in recent months. There has been criticism that the joint police-military patrols in the wake of the sniper murder were intimidating to Solomon Islanders, and that RAMSI personnel risked becoming detached from the community.⁴ A legal challenge has been brought against RAMSI for the alleged breach of an individual’s constitutional rights

during questioning in the aftermath of the sniper murder.

Some Members of Parliament have also criticised RAMSI, while a Cabinet Committee report prepared by several Cabinet Ministers recommended that RAMSI be wound back to just its law and order component. However, most Members of Parliament remain supportive of RAMSI’s performance. The Cabinet Committee Report on RAMSI was itself a review of the government-appointed Intervention Task Force’s Report, which was broadly constructive.⁵

RAMSI still enjoys great community support in Solomon Islands. The Cabinet Committee report has been criticised at the grass roots level for its proposal to wind back RAMSI. If anything, there is widespread concern that RAMSI will not stay long enough to complete its tasks, and that if that happens Solomon Islanders assisting RAMSI might be faced with traditional ‘payback’.

It is clear that some of the sniping comes from those affected by RAMSI's investigations and scrutiny of public finances. For example the Police Minister, who complained of a split between the PPF and the RSIP, has been arrested on charges of corruption. Nevertheless, the criticism perhaps indicates that RAMSI's 'honeymoon' period is over.

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Challenges ahead

For all of RAMSI's considerable achievements, the operation remains fragile. As Iraq, Afghanistan, Haiti, Kosovo, Bosnia and East Timor have shown, statebuilding is a highly difficult undertaking. Statebuilding operations around the world have either found it hard to restore security, or have had trouble making significant headway with broader reconstruction efforts once security has been restored.

RAMSI's phase one was always going to be easier than phases two or three. It did not in the end prove too difficult to break the cycle of criminality, although there are still some security concerns. Phases two and three, involving the complex tasks of addressing corruption, maintaining revenue compliance, rebuilding institutions, and reviving the economy, were always destined to be far thornier. Many challenges still lie ahead.

Going after the 'big fish'

Even in RAMSI's early days, there was clamouring from the grass roots for the mission to target the 'big fish'—senior political and business figures Solomon Islanders believed to be involved in corrupt

activity. The establishment of the Joint Corruption Task Force has meant that RAMSI's reach is extending to the most senior levels of society, including at the political level. And some of the people implicated in corrupt activity are among those who invited RAMSI in to Solomon Islands. This presents obvious difficulties, and has potential implications for political stability.

Furthermore, corruption investigations can be very intricate—they take time and consume significant resources. They also require Solomon Islanders to come forward to provide evidence against some of the 'big men' in society. That, in turn, requires people to feel comfortable that RAMSI is there for the duration.

RAMSI's structural foundation

While the recent criticism in parliament has come to little on this occasion, it does demonstrate the precariousness of the operation and the risk inherent in the way RAMSI is structured. RAMSI was invited in by the Solomon Islands Government, and remains at the government's pleasure. It is therefore based on a minimal derogation of Solomon Islands' sovereignty: in seeking a mandate for RAMSI, Australia engaged with the Solomon Islands elite, some of whom have been implicated in the extortion of public funds. It was certainly easier and more politically feasible to proceed this way at the time of RAMSI's inception. But it has left the operation vulnerable to shifting political alignments. While the Solomon Islands Parliament as a whole currently supports the mission and all of its elements, a realignment of political forces in Honiara could see parliament's support for RAMSI evaporate. And while RAMSI still enjoys broad public support, a few senior people whose financial interests are being affected could potentially frustrate the whole mission.

Could Australia walk away from Solomon Islands if requested by the Solomon Islands Government? Many Solomon Islanders might not want it to. Revocation of the invitation, or a request to roll back some of RAMSI's elements would place Australia in a very difficult position. Australia has invested a great deal in RAMSI, and it is very much viewed as a comprehensive package. Such a turn of events would require Australia to make a decision on whether Solomon Islands' sovereign process should be circumvented. Some analysts argue that Australia should not feel too inhibited by the traditional Westphalian conception of sovereignty, especially when younger generations of Pacific Islanders do not seem to revere it as much as many in the older generation.

The recent High Court case against RAMSI also presents a challenge. RAMSI is underpinned by Solomon Islands enabling legislation, under which RAMSI personnel have immunity from legal proceedings in Solomon Islands for actions in the course of or pertaining to their duties. The legal challenge raises issues relating to this immunity, and could potentially have a significant impact on RAMSI's operations.

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The risk of dependency

Not long after RAMSI deployed, there arose a saying on the streets of Honiara: 'weitem olketa RAMSI bae kam stretem' ('wait for RAMSI to come and fix it'). Preventing a culture of dependency in Solomon Islands will be an ongoing challenge for RAMSI, as it is

for all statebuilding operations. The scholars Francis Fukuyama and Michael Ignatieff have written of the tendency of such operations to engage in not so much capacity building as 'capacity sucking-out'.⁶

It has been difficult for RAMSI personnel to make the transition from often doing the job themselves—the hallmark of the initial days of the operation—to a role more characterised by mentoring and skills transfer. Such a role takes more time, and can sometimes be frustrating. But it is critical to the ultimate success of the mission. A real question exists as to sustainability after RAMSI departs: unless processes are firmly bedded down and expertise successfully transferred, the situation in Solomon Islands could revert upon RAMSI's withdrawal.

Ethnic tensions and lingering security concerns

Another challenge is the ongoing management of the ethnic tensions which destabilised the country from 1998–2003. Ensuring each side feels they are being dealt with similarly and that neither side perceives unfair treatment will require continuous attention from RAMSI. This includes the handling of investigations and prosecutions.

It is clear that there are lingering security issues related to the militias and gangs that need constant monitoring. While many guns have been collected, high-powered weapons are still out there, especially on Malaita. The backlog of court cases has also fuelled tensions in prison, and there was a prison riot last August.

Young population

One of the keys to Solomon Islands' long-term success will be the revival of its economy. In this regard, Solomon Islands' youth bulge poses a fundamental challenge. Over 50% of the population is under 20. The population



Solomon Islands National Peace Council Chairman Paul Tovua and an Australian Defence Force member destroying firearms during the first RAMSI weapons destruction ceremony in Honiara, July 26, 2003. © Defence Department

growth rate is 3.3%—one of the highest in the world—and it is hard for the economic growth rate to exceed it. At present there is little in the way of economic activity to occupy the young population. Now that RAMSI has brought security, people want jobs.

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Ongoing cost to Australia

RAMSI is a costly enterprise for Australia—around \$200 million per year. It is also a significant commitment in terms of personnel. A bureaucratic reconfiguration in Canberra has taken place since RAMSI deployed: there are now dedicated South Pacific areas within the Attorney-General's, Treasury and Finance Departments.

An International Deployment Group (IDG) has been established within the Australian Federal Police (AFP), making Australia one of the few countries in the world with a unit for international assistance operations within its civilian policing capability. The AFP has been stretched thinly by its commitments in Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and elsewhere. Notwithstanding the AFP's recent budget increases and some increase in personnel, there is a question as to the sustainability of ongoing, sizeable deployments of Australian police. Keeping a continuous stream of deployees—and keeping their quality high—will be a considerable challenge.

And as with all statebuilding operations, there is also the need to balance two conflicting imperatives. Lengthy deployments keep staff away from personal commitments and other professional opportunities for long periods, and this can discourage some people from applying. However, overly short postings can result in an unacceptably high loss of institutional memory.

Staying the course

There is a concern among a considerable number of Solomon Islanders that Australia will wind up RAMSI prematurely. This concern has important implications, including for the gathering of evidence in investigations. The Australian Government has made a commitment to Solomon Islands of five to ten years, and RAMSI has bipartisan support within Australia. But any policy can fall victim to changing domestic and international imperatives. For RAMSI to be effective, Solomon Islanders need to believe that Australia will stay the course.

Lessons learned

RAMSI still has much work to do. But after 20 months a number of observations can be made, which might have relevance to statebuilding operations elsewhere.

The importance of early, demonstrable wins

The optics of RAMSI at the outset proved to be highly significant. The rapid deployment of over 2,000 police and military personnel throughout the country unambiguously signalled to Solomon Islanders that things had changed, and a highly visible gun amnesty captured the national imagination. Some luck was perhaps involved with Harold Keke's quiet, almost anti-climactic surrender. Nonetheless, decisive 'wins' helped to secure RAMSI's reputation—in Solomon Islands, in Australia and in the broader region, all important audiences—in the critical early days.

Unity of command

Coordination by one individual has also proven to be a factor in RAMSI's success. The civilian Special Coordinator has overseen all elements of the operation—this has avoided much of the overlapping, duplication, confusion and turf wars that have too often bedevilled other statebuilding missions.

Expertise on the ground

Statebuilding operations can be only as good as the people who comprise them. One of the clear lessons of RAMSI has been the importance of the quality of the personnel, especially those in leadership positions. There have been real advantages in deploying people—particularly into leadership roles—who have prior experience in the region: an understanding of the 'wantok' system, for example, has made it easier to build up trust among Solomon Islanders. There are also advantages in deploying people with experience of other statebuilding operations (such as experience in East Timor).

The importance of training

Of course, it has been impossible for everyone deployed with RAMSI to have had expertise in the region. And overseas deployments present personnel with profoundly different operating environments from the ones they are used to. RAMSI's rapid roll-out meant that the first contingent of RAMSI staff was not given much preparatory training. There is no doubt that it is ideal to prepare personnel for their operating environment, including intensive pre-deployment training in language, history, culture, and politics. It also makes sense for deployed staff to be trained in the art of transferring skills to local staff.

Security first, and comprehensive statebuilding

Solomon Islands was experiencing acute state crisis, and many of its problems were interconnected. It would have been little use, for instance, to just address the law and order problems without also seeking to tackle the lack of economic opportunity which helps to fuel them. Accordingly, RAMSI was designed as a comprehensive package that included law and justice, financial, and economic assistance, as well as assistance with service delivery.

Restoring security was the condition precedent for all other activity. But statebuilding operations clearly require more than just the restoration of security and the building of new facilities, important though those activities are. They also require the rebuilding of institutions, which involves shaping new processes, altering modes of behaviour, and instilling confidence. These are difficult tasks and take a long time.

Long-term commitment

Statebuilding operations therefore need to be sustained over the long term. RAMSI's timeframe is talked of in terms of a five to ten year commitment. But it might well be that an even longer timeframe—of a generation or more—is needed to build the processes of governance necessary for effective statehood. Such a long commitment is fraught with potential problems for the assisting states

as well as the local population; either side could tire of the ongoing involvement. But it might be what is required to create enduring institutions and an effective state.

The creative use of foreign policy tools

There has been a distinct evolution in the foreign policy tools the Australian Government now seeks to use in Australia's immediate region. The region is no longer the sole preserve of diplomats, development advisers and defence personnel. Police, accountants, economic advisers and lawyers are also now involved. This shift is the result of a growing awareness that the varied tasks of statebuilding are best performed by those organisations most qualified to fulfil them. The pursuit of criminal investigations and the rebuilding of local policing capability, for example, are tasks best performed by police rather than the military.



Australian soldiers and police walk through a market in the Solomon Islands capital of Honiara as part of security patrols in the city, December 26, 2004. AAP/Lloyd Jones/2004 AAP

The mission should suit the context

There is no one-size-fits-all template for statebuilding operations: each deployment needs to be contextualised. One of the lessons from RAMSI's early days is that equipment and processes should be appropriate for the local environment. If, for example, equipment requires considerable or complicated maintenance, it will not be sustainable.

Cultural awareness is also vital to the success of such operations. And wage and accommodation disparities between deployed and local staff need to be handled sensitively.

Engaging stakeholders and effective communication

RAMSI hit the ground running, and much needed to be achieved in those crucial first few months. Some Solomon Islanders believed that RAMSI did not engage as many stakeholders as it could in this period.

RAMSI has since sought to broaden its consultation base. Certainly, statebuilding operations require continuing support from across the country and from a wide range of sectors. To help maintain such support, operations need effective and wide-reaching communications strategies.

What statebuilding can and cannot do

Some Solomon Islanders have seen RAMSI as a cure-all for every problem besetting their country. A statebuilding operation cannot address all ills afflicting a society. There is no doubt that statebuilding missions have a profoundly transformative impact on affected societies. But some issues involving key questions of national identity should remain outside the realm of statebuilding operations.

In Solomon Islands, issues of land tenure, reconciliation, and centralisation versus decentralisation all need to be addressed.

But RAMSI has decided that these issues are outside its remit: they are for Solomon Islanders to decide upon. What RAMSI seeks to do is to give the community a secure environment in which to debate important national issues, and to provide Solomon Islands with effective state machinery as these issues are discussed.

And statebuilding operations can only do so much without local momentum for reform. For lasting change to take root, there is a need to work with local reformers to build that momentum. RAMSI makes much of the fact that it operates in partnership with the Solomon Islands Government and people, and that continued local political will is necessary for the reform to continue.

Lastly, there is the vexed question about the long-term prognosis for Solomon Islands. As with some other Pacific Island states, Solomon Islands has a small though fast-growing population, it has limited resources, and might ultimately lack the critical mass for its economy to be viable. While RAMSI can help to optimise Solomon Islands' economic potential, this is not in the end an issue that RAMSI can resolve. So while RAMSI is working to build up Solomon Islands' institutions, Australia and New Zealand are also promoting through the PIF increased regional cooperation and the pooling of governance. As accession to the European Union might be the answer for the Balkan states, so deeper regional integration might serve to maximise the prosperity of the states in the South Pacific.

** This paper expands on a presentation made at the International Studies Association Convention in Hawaii on 5 March 2005 and a speech given at the Australian Red Cross-Asialink Solferino Lecture in Melbourne on 16 March 2005.*

Endnotes

- 1 For greater detail on the pre-RAMSI situation in Solomon Islands, see the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Report *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the future of Solomon Islands*, ASPI, Canberra, June 2003.
- 2 Samoa, Cook Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu have since also joined RAMSI.
- 3 Two Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF) militia members have been arrested for the sniper murder.
- 4 See for example Bishop Terry Brown, 'RAMSI, the Police and the Future', *Solomon Star*, 18 January 2005.
- 5 The Intervention Task Force Report recommended a PIF Eminent Persons Group review of RAMSI.
- 6 See Francis Fukuyama, 'Nation-Building 101', *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 293, January–February 2004, pp. 159–164, and *State Building: Governance and World Order in the Twenty-First Century*, Profile Books, London, 2004. See also Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan*, Vintage, Great Britain, 2003.

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