

## **RAMSI: INTERVENTION, AID TRAUMA AND SELF GOVERNANCE**

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The Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was an intervention force requested by the Solomon Islands Government to help stabilise the country after a period of civil strife. It became an experiment in 'cooperative intervention' – at a time of uninvited intervention, elsewhere – and exercised the imagination of a number of 'failed state' theorists. After more than five years, and with the evaporation of initial rationales that instability in the Solomon Islands might pose a 'terrorist' threat, much uncertainty remains over its future. On the one hand, RAMSI as a security force still enjoys broad support. On the other hand, it has brought a number of new problems.

This article explains the origins of RAMSI, including the tensions of 2006-2007 and surveys of Solomon Islander responses to the mission. Using the evidence of informed local voices, it discusses 'aid trauma', the harmful side-effects of a long term, conspicuously wealthy foreign occupation. The elements of aid trauma are: an inflationary bubble economy, failures in domestic institution building and training, and relative deprivation. The article addresses the question, raised by 'deep interventionists', as to whether the Solomon Islands has progressed in living standards since independence. As a means of reflecting on the future of RAMSI, I juxtapose Australian 'state building' notions with Solomon Islander views on the role of RAMSI in their relatively new self-governing society. This leads to concluding reflections on the future of RAMSI.

## Crisis and Intervention

The recent crisis began in 1998 when the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA), later known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), took up arms to enforce long standing grievances over land and economic opportunities against settlers, mainly from the neighbouring island of Malaita. These actions followed years of economic pressures from unsustainable logging and public service cuts (Bennett 2002: 10).

Logging in the Solomons had moved from the limited government owned or leased lands to customary land (85% of all land tenure) in the 1980s. Government and some clans quickly became dependent on logging income, with exports at 659,000 cubic metres in 1994 and 748,500 cubic metres in 1995, representing more than half export revenue and 31% of government revenues (Kabutaulaka 2005: 90-91). The Asian financial crisis of 1997 slowed logging in the Pacific, as the mainly Malaysian companies reduced their operations and customers scaled back purchases (IPS 1998). This catalysed a small downturn in the formal economy, though not so serious as the downturn to come, in 2000-01 (Table 1). The moderate nature of the 1997 recession in the formal economy – alongside the long standing grievances over land and justice, and the exclusion of most Solomon Islanders from the formal economy – suggest that economic recession was more a result than a cause of the crisis.

**Table 1: Solomon Islands - Annual Percentage Growth in the Formal Economy**

1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
1.6	-1.7	3.2	-1.6	-14.2	-8	-2.8	6.5	8	5	6.1	6

*Source:* Asian Development Bank 2008; World Bank 2008

Fundamental to the post-1998 developments were grievances over land. Although migration and land acquisition was often accompanied by traditional agreements, family reunions of settlers extended the pressures on land. When Guadalcanal people looked for new gardens ‘they often found their land pockmarked by Malaitan settlements’ (Bennett 2002: 8). Malaitans had been the ‘mainstay of an indentured labour trade’, first to

Queensland then to Fiji and then within the Solomons, when the plantations were developed (Moore 2007: 173).

Land and justice grievances had been stated in Guadalcanal petitions of 1988 and 1998. The 1988 claim stressed an end to violence against Guadalcanal people, repatriation of those who occupied Guadalcanal traditional lands, a fairer system of education and health services and 'that future major economic development projects be accommodated elsewhere' (Billy Gatu 1988: 195-6). Nothing was done, even over a number of highlighted murders of Guadalcanal people. The petitions complained they had been left with 'no justice'. The subsequent 1998 'Demands by the Bona Fide and Indigenous People of Guadalcanal', led by the Guadalcanal Provincial Premier, called for constitutional change, state government for the provinces, return of alienated traditional lands, resource and plantation rents for the province and landowners, controls on internal migration and compensation for murdered Guadalcanal citizens (Guadalcanal Provincial Assembly 1998: 197-203). The complaint that Guadalcanal (Guale) people had not benefited from development on their island was strong, and came not only from those whose traditional lands were affected, but from those in the more remote areas (such as the southern Weather Coast) who had been cut off from the development of roads, basic services and commercial opportunities.

With the grievance of these claims, the GRA/IFM began terrorising Malaitan communities (some of whom had intermarried with Guale people and so established their families' own customary rights to land) on the island of Guadalcanal. At first shops were ransacked and migrant workers were chased from plantations and farms. There were several attacks and murders. Warriors in traditional gear invaded schools and villages and gave the Malaitans (sometimes their friends and cousins) a set time to leave (Fraenkel 2004: 53-55). Malaitans were the main victims of these 1998-99 evictions. By November 1999 over 35,000 people (34% of the Guadalcanal population) had been displaced from their homes; 70% of these were from rural areas (mainly the north coast) and 30% from the capital, Honiara (census data in Fraenkel 2004: 55-56)

Peace talks, brokered by outside parties, attempted to resolve the crisis, through a series of agreements. However, by late 1999 young men from the Malaitan communities, with the backing of their political leaders,

formed a Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), which sought revenge on the Guale militants. Fighting escalated in and, in a MEF orchestrated coup in June 2000, Prime Minister Ulufa'alu was kidnapped and forced to resign. The MEF, supported by large sections of the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP), declared war on the GRA/IFM. 'Payback' escalated the crisis, so that the killings escalated from 10 or 20 by late 1999 to over 100 by the end of 2000. The Gold Ridge mining operation, in central Guadalcanal, was shut down (Fraenkel 2004: 70, 80, 87, 91; Moore 2007: 171). Peace talks held at Townsville, Australia in October 2000 led to agreements that were not respected or enforced. Harold Keke, leader of the Weather Coast IFM, renounced the Townsville agreement and internecine fighting broke out, both between and within the IFM and MEF. Conflict extended to Western province and included some former Bougainville militants. However, Weather Coast militants remained in conflict with the 'joint operations' of the MEF and the RSIP police (Fraenkel 2004: 141-144). Due to this perceived alliance, the Weather Coast people in particular lost all confidence in their own police, the RSIP (Smith 2008).

**Table 2: A Chronology of Significant Events**

<b>Event</b>	<b>Date</b>
Solomon Islands gains independence from Britain	1978
First Guadalcanal petition over settlers and justice matters	1988
Second Guadalcanal petition – crisis erupts	1998
Solomon Islands Government (SIG) calls for outside assistance	1999-2003
RAMSI intervenes	2003
Open tensions between SIG and Australia over RAMSI	2006-2007
Both SIG and Australian Governments change	2007

Canberra came at the crisis from a different perspective. As late as January 2003 Foreign Minister Alexander Downer had argued that sending troops to the Solomons would be 'folly in the extreme ... for how many years would such an occupation have to continue? And what would be the exit strategy?' (Downer 2003a). These were reasonable questions. However, after participating in the US-led 'pre-emptive' attack on Iraq in March 2003, on the basis (later proven false) that the regime possessed 'weapons of mass destruction' and could strike at any

time, Prime Minister Howard returned from a visit to the U.S. President with renewed security plans for the region (Kim 2003). Canberra was also influenced by its earlier intervention in the Bougainville war (Downer 2004). In June, Downer launched an Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) paper on the Solomon Islands, in which principal author Elsin Wainwright suggested the small, troubled Solomon Islands could be a threat to Australia. The ASPI report contained five references to possible terrorism and twelve references to a 'failed state', the keyword in international law that might justify non-invited intervention in a sovereign state. Australian intervention was thus said to be justified (even though in this case it had been invited) to avert the development of a 'petri dish in which transnational and non-state security threats can develop and flourish' (ASPI 2003: 13).

This advice was influential, but misleading. Others have observed that - unlike in the Balkans where the notion of threats from 'failed states' were developed - Melanesian states have never been strong (e.g. Dinnen 2008: 3-4, 7). Most Melanesian countries, including the Solomon Islands, have strong communities but weak states, and are still in the process of nation building and state building. Nevertheless, in July Prime Minister Howard claimed that 'a failed state in our region ... will jeopardise our own security. Rogue and failed states could become a base from which terrorists and transnational criminals organise their operations' (Grattan 2003). The newly appointed, British-born RSIP Police Commissioner, Bill Morrell, contradicted this, saying there was no basis for suggesting that the Solomons posed any terrorist threat to Australia (SBS 2003). Regardless, Howard claimed an 'immense moral and humanitarian dividend' from the U.S.-led war on Iraq and, continuing in a self-congratulatory mode, asserted that Australia enjoyed 'unparalleled world respect' for its willingness to take a stand in the Solomons (Howard 2003).

While some Solomon Islanders may have been influenced by the militance of neighbouring Bougainville in previous years (Connell 2006: 119), despite the crisis in Honiara and on disputed lands, more than 80% of Solomon Islanders simply got on with their lives. The village, traditional lands and custom demonstrated their powerful cohesive force, when police and government had collapsed (Roughan 2008).

The formal request for intervention came from Solomon Islands Prime Minister Alan Kemakeza, who had been Minister for Forests in the mid-1990s, during the ‘worst excesses of logging’ (Moore 2007: 177). Two previous Solomon Islands Prime Ministers had made similar requests, and Kemakeza made his from a weak position; but his request was successful. The climate of the invasion of Iraq seems to have influenced Canberra’s thinking. Downer foreshadowed a ‘cooperative intervention’ (Downer 2003b), an expression which would be debated in the regional ‘state building’ literature (e.g. Kabutaulaka 2004; Barbara 2008; Fry and Kabutaulaka 2008). However, he later used RAMSI as an example of the needs for intervention outside the UN system but within what he claimed to be ‘international law’, linking the Solomons intervention to the invasion of Iraq (Downer 2004). Whatever the immediate cause, the Australian turnabout led quickly to the mobilisation of a multi-nation group sanctioned by the Pacific Island Forum.

RAMSI became an Australian-led, police dominated body with military and bureaucratic backing that included representatives from several Pacific Island Forum members. The initial contributors of police were: Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Nauru and the Cook Islands. In 2006 Papua New Guinea contributed some officers; in 2007 the Micronesian states of Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, Palau, FSM and Niue all contributed one or two police each (Global Collaborative 2007). Total numbers varied over time but between 2004 and 2007 the Australian Federal Police contingent made up 69% to 76% of total numbers, thus dominating the force (see Table 3).

RAMSI was authorised and indemnified through Solomon Islands law and broadly supported by all sides. A treaty between the Solomon Islands, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Tonga backed RAMSI (DFAT 2003). The force arrived in Honiara on 24 July 2003, to no resistance and general welcome, and began a process of retrieving weapons and making arrests. There was little need for armed troops, and most of these were withdrawn in late 2003 and early 2004 (Moore 2007: 176). Under the Facilitation of International Assistance Act (2003) the Solomon Islands Government (SIG) was able to authorise a ‘visiting contingent’ of police, army and others, from other countries. These army and police personnel were authorised as their domestic

counterparts and could carry and seize weapons, operate vehicles, use various facilities free of charge, be exempt from tax and other regulations and could use ‘reasonably necessary’ force to achieve a public purpose. Further, they would have ‘immunity from legal proceedings’ for actions that were related to their ‘official duties’ (s.17). The referring country could also claim authority in any ‘criminal or disciplinary’ action regarding their own personnel.

**Table 3: RAMSI Police by Nationality**

Countries	July 2004	July 2005	March 2007
<b>Australia</b>	208	294	227
<b>New Zealand</b>	35	31	36
<b>Fiji</b>	15	13	8
<b>Tonga</b>	12	12	10
<b>Samoa</b>	10	9	7
<b>Vanuatu</b>	12	5	3
<b>Kiribati</b>	5	5	5
<b>Nauru</b>	3	4	5
<b>Cook Islands</b>	2	2	2
<b>Papua New Guinea</b>	-	10	6
<b>TOTAL PPF</b>	302	387	318

*Source:* Global Collaborative 2007

RAMSI’s mandate was broad, and vague. Its ‘immediate objective’ was to restore law and order, including weapons retrieval. Its three areas of work were defined as: ‘machinery of government - helping government better serve the people’; ‘economic governance – encouraging broad based economic growth’; and ‘law and justice’ (RAMSI 2008). While the ‘law and justice’ role was important to stabilising the country, after the violence of the crisis period, none of RAMSI’s mandate directly addressed the roots of the crisis. These issues involved land, ethnic accommodation, reform of the country’s constitutional structure, national identity and national institutions. John Roughan noted that land was ‘the issue’ at the root of the conflict. No long term resolution could come without recognition of the centrality of land in Solomon Island village life; and 84% of the people still lived in the village. Nor was this a matter

that could be resolved by simple legal process, such as land registration (Roughan 2003), which had been urged by successive Australian Governments, throughout the region.

### **Local Reactions**

How was RAMSI seen by Solomon Islanders? The Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT), probably the largest and best established domestic NGO in the Solomons, carried out a survey three weeks before the first troops arrived and found that 'island people (2,100 town and provincial respondents) marked the intervention force with a 94% approval rate.' Later, in February 2004, another SIDT poll of 2,341 people in all provinces (including 'men, women, young men and young women in almost equal numbers') showed that, while 88% nationally backed RAMSI's security effort, 74% felt the justice system was working better, 66% felt services had improved and 64% felt they were enjoying a better life. In other words, RAMSI was appreciated more in security terms. Services and well-being were arguably not within RAMSI's mandate, but comments made suggested many local people felt they were (Roughan 2004a). Expectations had been raised. In their July 2005 poll, and because some frustrated leaders had begun to demand that RAMSI 'leave quickly', the SIDT added this question; but 71% of Solomon Islanders disagreed. However 22% did agree that RAMSI should leave; though most felt this way just 'a little bit'. The SIDT concluded '[Solomon Islanders] want the RAMSI presence to continue, to reinforce its work patterns and to depart only when normal life comes flooding back to village and town folk lives' (Roughan 2005).

There were other surveys. In 2004 the Pacific Islands Forum commissioned a social impact assessment of the peace process, reviewing law and order, economy, basic services and civil society. Its team interviewed over a hundred people (mostly Solomon Islanders), conducted some community meetings and made some recommendations for program reform. It found that RAMSI 'has undoubtedly created a conducive climate within which to restore basic services' (RRRT/UNDP 2004: viii-ix). On the economic or developmental role of RAMSI the report noted the high expectations of RAMSI but added that few people



knew just 'what RAMSI's long-term plans are'. Further, 'A repeating concern has been raised about the effectiveness of current counter-parting arrangement between RAMSI personnel and local DOF [finance] staff. Local staff members feel excluded and RAMSI personnel are not coaching/mentoring or transferring skills to national counterparts' (RRRT/UNDP 2004: 19). This complaint about ineffective training would be repeated later.

An eminent persons group, commissioned by the PIF, reviewed and congratulated RAMSI in 2005, but observed the 'hard part lies ahead'. Their report stated 'the Government and people of Solomon Islands must take the lead in rebuilding the nation and not waver from this path' (EPG 2005), thus refocusing attention on exactly who carries the responsibility for nation building.

A major test for RAMSI came almost three years into its mandate. The national elections of April 2006 and crowd reaction to the nomination of former Deputy Prime Minister Snyder Rini as Prime Minister were followed by a riot in which much of Chinatown was burnt and RAMSI police vehicles were attacked. Some observed that the riots 'demonstrated the despair felt by many citizens when the old guard were returned' (Moore 2007: 193). Rini was associated with Kemakeza and logging corruption. Days after the riot, Rini lost his parliamentary support, and Manasseh Sogavare was nominated by MPs for his second term as Prime Minister. However, recriminations over the riots put pressure on Solomon Island Government, RAMSI and Australian Government relations. The burning of Chinatown was a serious challenge to RAMSI which, while priding itself on restoring law and order, had neither anticipated nor been able to control the riots. Indeed, Australian police had themselves become targets. Bishop Terry Brown commented:

The 'spark' that sent the rioters into central Honiara from Parliament, the use of tear gas by the Australian RAMSI contingent against the crowd around Parliament ... needs to be investigated. The Speaker of Parliament and leaders of the parties were apparently preparing to address the crowd and calm them down ... [when] the RAMSI tear gas hit ... It is cited as an

example of Australian RAMSI's over-reaction to events (Brown 2006).

RAMSI police pursued several politicians they suspected of involvement. Yet, as they arrested Malaitan MPs Charles Dausabea and Nelson Ne'e, Prime Minister Sogavare ordered a formal inquiry into the broader causes of the riot. In the terms of reference for the Inquiry Sogavare proposed examination of the possible role of MPs, political parties and groups and also 'the role and responsibility of the Solomon Island Police Force and the Participating Police Force'. The latter reference upset the Australian government.

A war of words erupted between Honiara and Canberra over the riots and the inquiry, and this put a cloud over RAMSI throughout 2006-2007; indeed until there was a change of government in both countries. The Australian Government approach was often aggressive, using the 'Moti affair' as justification. In a highly provocative move, RAMSI police raided Prime Minister Sogavare's office, in pursuit of documents for their investigation into criminal allegations against Julian Moti, whom Sogavare had appointed Attorney General. It became a test of wills between the two governments, with an unusual show of resistance from a Pacific leader. Canberra then imposed visa bans on Solomons Ministers wishing to visit Australia. Some constructive talk between the Solomons Government and RAMSI officials was held in that period (Forum Secretariat 2006), but there was substantial confrontation. Sogavare threatened to withdraw support for RAMSI if Canberra's threats were not withdrawn. A struggle emerged at the 2006 Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) meeting, with Sogavare urging more PIF and less Australian control of RAMSI (Manning 2006). However, after Sogavare boycotted the 2007 PIF meeting, some of his ministers defected, worried that communications with Australia would completely break down (Iroga 2008). Dr Derek Sikua, Sogavare's Education Minister, was voted in as new Prime Minister. Only after this were the Australian visa bans on Solomons Ministers removed (*The Age* 2008).

RAMSI commissioned popular surveys on its own performance. The summary version of the 2007 survey stresses a 90% support rate for RAMSI; but the detail of the survey is more interesting. RAMSI's surveys were carried out by an Australian National University body in

2006 and 2007 (with another planned for 2008). Survey design and leadership was all Australian, while those who conducted the surveys were mostly Solomon Islanders.

The 2006 'Pilot survey' was disrupted by the election and its aftermath and was not fully representative, covering 1085 respondents in four of the nine provinces only, plus Honiara. It showed economic perceptions as 'generally negative', with 87% of people complaining of high prices and 70% saying their economic situation 'was worse than the year before'. In security, only 36% regarded their villages as safe and peaceful' but 59% said the law and order situation had improved in the past year. In policing, 48% had experienced some theft in the past year, 28% had reported this to police and only 25% were satisfied (63% not satisfied) with action taken by police. On justice, 41% would prefer to use customary law to modern law and 47% said it would depend on the circumstances. 77% voted in the 2006 election but 57% thought corruption in national government had increased (ANU Enterprise 2006: 6-9). This poll showed a substantial degree of dissatisfaction with governance.

In the 2007 poll, which covered eight provinces and Honiara, interviewing 5,154 respondents: 35% 'said their current financial household situation was better than 2 years ago and 35% said it was worse'; 81% did not have a health centre and 69% did not have a primary school in their village or community; 46% described their community as 'safe and peaceful', while 45% said law and order had improved; 89% had had no formal contact with the RSIP police in the last year; almost all (98%) had heard of RAMSI, 63% had seen a RAMSI officer in three past three months but only 12% had spoken to one. Most thought RAMSI was here to 'keep the peace' (62%), to 'improve law and justice' (42%), or to 'arrest criminals' (22%); while 90% said they supported the presence of RAMSI in the country (ANU Enterprise 2007: 6-12).

The 90% headline support was repeatedly used by the Australian Government, but this was too simple. The two surveys together show that while RAMSI maintained a strong symbolic role (with the idea stronger than actual contact with RAMSI personnel), the RAMSI occupation period had been characterised by: indifferent or worsening economic prospects, very limited or absent basic services (education and health)

and not even a majority perception of improvements in justice or law and order.

In this circumstance, political leaders would do well to read the two RAMSI surveys in some detail, rather than simply quote the headline ‘90% support’ figure. The danger, reinforced by the tendency of Australian public servants to engage more in self-congratulation than self-criticism, is that discontent and looming problems will be ignored. The likelihood of this is further reinforced by the cultural isolation of Australian RAMSI personnel, in particular. Australian academic Matthew Allen, noting the cultural gulf in discussions of RAMSI, and after interviewing a range of Solomon Islanders including former militants, observed that: ‘it is perilously dangerous to ignore the dissenting views of a minority of people’. Australian self-congratulation over RAMSI had ignored important local perspectives. The 2006 riots and failures in policing demonstrated to Solomon Islanders that RAMSI was no longer ‘infallible’. Australian officers were ‘the least liked’ of all foreign police, their communications were poor and their heavy handed operations often contrasted with their self-proclaimed ‘light touch’ (Allen 2006: 194-197).

Nor did RAMSI do anything to halt the unsustainable and illegal logging. A National Economic Recovery plan in 2003 found that logging had been corrupt and unsustainable. An AusAID assessment in 2003 drew similar conclusions, and recommended an immediate reduction in log harvesting levels. However, a Department of Natural Resources audit in 2005 found that the amount of logs exported had tripled and tax avoided from logging had risen from \$10 million to \$30 million. Logs harvested rose from 550,000 cubic metres in 2002 to 1.2 million in 2005 (*Masalai I Tokaut* 2006: 2-3). Environmental destruction had accelerated.

### **Aid Trauma**

After the initial experience of emergency aid or protection, a distinct social process begins in a heavily aid-administered country. When crisis conditions subside, foreign involvement in the administration and economic development of a sovereign country takes on quite a different

character. Dependent and debilitating processes have been seen, for example, in the 'aid caravans' of post civil war Mozambique (Middleton and O'Keefe 1998) and newly independent Timor-Leste (Beauvais 2001). Some common features recur in the transition from welcomed emergency aid to resented developmental management. Yet these features seem to be more apparent to locals than foreigners.

The presence of a small, extremely highly paid foreign enclave of people might not in itself inflict damage on a developing society; nor is the obvious and well documented phenomenon of 'boomerang aid' (e.g. Aid/Watch 2005) - where most aid money flows back to recipient country companies and individuals - a directly hostile move. However, there are transmission mechanisms for damage. Based on the surveys and some additional interviews with experienced Solomon Islanders, we can say that the 'aid caravan' in Honiara since 2003 has also brought with it a number of common and highly resented features that can be characterised as 'aid trauma'. These comprise: an inflationary 'enclave bubble economy', failures in human and institutional capacity building and relative deprivation.

The 'disarticulation' of economic development in poor countries is now well documented (e.g. Amin 1976; Stokes and Anderson 1990). Enclave 'bubble economies' of the relatively large 'aid caravans' in small island states clearly contribute to this phenomenon. Benefits are not spread widely, due to weak 'linkages', yet the wider population is hit by inflationary pressures. Some analysts, explaining why the goodwill towards RAMSI had 'evaporated', pointed out that the economic benefits from RAMSI were in Honiara, and 'concentrated in a few large businesses' (Roughan, Greener-Barcham and Barcham 2006: 2). In any case, for the 84% of people living in villages, RAMSI had made little difference, as the aid was mainly a 'bubble' in the capital city (Roughan 2008).

There were labour disputes in Honiara, as some contractors tested how low they could push wages. Patrick Defence Logistics, contracted for services to the military, suddenly cut the wages of its local workers 'from SI \$70 a day to SI \$32 [one Solomon Islands dollar = about six Australian dollars]. No dialogue, no discussion, no compromise' (Roughan 2004b). One priest and long time Solomons resident, despite

his general sympathy to foreign aid workers and to RAMSI as a security force, was particularly bitter about the role of RAMSI as a law enforcer. 'RAMSI seemed to consider itself infallible, and so did the foreign contractors', he said, 'they were both very much aware of their power.' RAMSI showed an unwillingness to scrutinise Australian contractors. 'Everything and everyone Australian seemed to be sacrosanct. Criticism was not tolerated and certainly not appreciated. However ... foreign contractors coming in the wake of armies are not charitable organisations and are in constant need of scrutiny' (Hooymayers 2008).

Housing inflation in Honiara impacted heavily on Solomon Islanders, whose wages could not match those of the foreigners (even if they were paid by RAMSI). One community worker said this had really hurt local workers. 'Before a small house in town would rent for between SI \$600 and SI \$1,000; now they are between SI \$2,000 and SI \$5,000. They [RAMSI personnel] are also buying houses.' The result has been that many government workers - on wages of perhaps SI \$1,000 to SI \$2,000 per month - 'are living in the squatter camps on the outside of town' (Wate 2008). An experienced journalist agreed that RAMSI had changed the pattern of accommodation in Honiara. 'A lot of locals are displaced' he said. RAMSI personnel looked for the best houses and offered more money. One of this journalist's friends used to live in Nggosi, now the capital's most exclusive area. 'You rarely see Solomon Islanders there now, except perhaps as a cleaner. It's all Australians and their company managers.' Rents range from SI \$15,000 to SI \$40,000 per month. The most any well-off Solomon Islander pays is about SI \$5,000. Before RAMSI 'the best house cost SI \$2,000 per month, now that's [about the cost of] the worst' (Iroga 2008). Living as they do in a bubble economy, the foreigners can deal with this inflation; the locals, on the other hand, are increasingly excluded.

This dual system also creates problems in training and institution building. The 'weak cultural engagement' in policing efforts and poor cultural relations generally (Roughan, Greener-Barcham and Barcham 2006: 2) translates into problems of training and 'handing over' responsibility. People are often tempted to believe that, as they are paid more, their role is more important. Yet there are repeated complaints from Solomon Islanders and long term residents that locals are rejected

for work taken by highly paid foreigners. A Catholic Bishop says the Australian RAMSI personnel, in particular, developed a 'not customer friendly' approach after they arrived, and that they had been 'rigid' in their role, refusing to do small tasks that might develop goodwill. They would probably find it 'not easy' to hand over their responsibilities. The Bishop was concerned to see young people working 'with the white man', yet with strong differences in pay and conditions. The Australian often had no family to support. The 'ugly face' of the relationship was that 'qualified Solomon Islanders are feeling threatened, they [miss out on jobs and] say 'they don't trust us'' (Smith 2008). A priest agreed: 'More [RAMSI] work should be done by Solomon Islanders. They have [the skills and] the equipment too.' He believed 'they must train' so as to 'hand over', but when asked if RAMSI people were capable of stepping back he replied, 'I doubt it' (Hooymayers 2008).

The same concern is expressed by some political leaders. Former Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare says RAMSI 'with no exit strategy' will create an aid dependency that 'has the effect of numbing [the capacity of] political brains to think independently' (National Express 2008: 5). He says that, after five years, 'very little has been done in getting the (Solomons police) force back on its feet' (Solomon Star 2008: 3).

Similarly, some of what RAMSI considers its achievements are not so well appreciated locally. After the crisis, and by late 2003, over eight RSIP police had been arrested, including several senior commanders (Moore 2007: 176). Two years later an Australian official would boast of 'the arrest of large numbers of law-breakers ... 6,300 on more than 9,100 charges' (Butler 2006: 4). However, very few of these arrests resulted in a conviction; most were acquitted or released. By early 2008, less than 200 people were in prison (Iroga 2008; Roughan 2008). Some see this as a reason for concern, as 'a lot of criminals are running free because of bungled investigations' (Wickham 2007). Perhaps this was fortunate, as the Solomon Islands simply cannot afford to maintain a large scale prison system, nor do large scale prosecutions assist the national reconciliation process (Roughan 2008). Church leaders certainly believe that criminalisation and prisons have severe limits as social remedies in the Solomons. One Catholic priest with over forty years experience in the Solomons, and 22 years as a prison chaplain, says 'the average militant

was a good man'. If they are to be sanctioned, they need to remain in the community. 'It's wrong to lock them up' (Hooymayers 2008). A Catholic bishop says much the same: 'You can't rehabilitate Solomon Islanders in prison – they must be in the community' (Smith 2008).

Resentment at 'relative deprivation' is the other, consequential element of 'aid trauma', especially in an 'emergency' aid program that runs too long. It is well evident in Honiara. The neoliberal view does not see even serious inequality as a problem, as it is said to act as a motivating force in 'market economies' (e.g. Friedman and Friedman 1980). Yet criminologists and sociologists remind us that perceived 'illegitimate' inequality, combined with labour market instability, generates crime and social insecurity (Vanneman and Pettigrew 1972; Braithwaite 1979; Blau and Blau 1982). This process is underway in the Solomons. Analysts say that RAMSI has become a symbol of inequality and 'relative deprivation'. It is seen as hypocritical, in urging austerity while 'practising profligacy', and remaining 'opaque' on its plans while preaching 'transparency' (Roughan, Greener-Barcham and Barcham 2006: 2). One angry Solomons MP put the resentment this way: 'RAMSI has over lived its usefulness in [the] Solomon Islands'. They had all the equipment and the Solomons police had none. He asked whether RAMSI was boosting the economy 'or sending their money back to Australia?' Security people might be needed to stay in Honiara but 'not technical advisors that are in the ministries now.' If RAMSI wanted to help it should build bridges, airfields, wharfs and hospitals, he urged (Waipora 2008: 6). RAMSI pleads that such things are outside its mission (Solomon Star 2008: 2). However, the longer a highly-paid crisis mission stays, the more the resentment at this 'relative deprivation' is likely to build.

## **The Solomons Since Independence**

Before reflecting on the future of RAMSI, it is worth briefly considering the progress of the Solomon Islands since independence in 1978. This question was raised by Sodhi (2008) on behalf of the inappropriately named Centre for Independent Studies, which is controlled by directors of Australia's major banks and mining companies (CIS 2008). Making



use of macroeconomic data (mainly real GDP *per capita*) Sodhi presents a 'deep intervention' argument backed by the claim that the Solomon Islands has made effectively no progress in standards of living. This is a dramatic claim with some important implications. If accepted, it tends to boost the utilitarian argument: 'it matters little if intervention interferes with political independence, as people will be better off'. While accepting that rural subsistence lifestyles have been important in supporting the population, Sodhi says 'per capita income in the Solomon Islands has fallen since 1975' and that 'the people of the Solomon Islands are no better off today than they were at independence thirty years ago' (Sodhi 2008). Measures are needed to boost economic growth, he says, including moves to increase cash production, which is said to require commercial property rights in land, which are in turn said to be 'essential' to the development of manufacturing and tourism. 'At the very least', he concludes, the country needs 'a realistic system of leases to free up land' (Sodhi 2008). The best conclusion to be drawn from this is that those commercial interests associated with the CIS are showing a keen interest in Solomon Islands land.

The CIS report correctly observes that 'lack of development in the Solomon Islands does not reflect a paucity of aid .. aid has failed to develop its economy or institutions.' Official Development Assistance to the Solomon Islands in 1990 was listed as 21.6% of GDP, and in 2005 as 66.5% of GDP (due to RAMSI) (UNDP 2007: p.292). Indeed, the money measures of ODA bear little relation to any real development measure. However, the CIS is dismissive of the use of Millennium Development Goals (broader socio-economic progress measures, defined by the United Nations), claiming for example that MDG goals on hunger and nutrition 'do not apply to the South Pacific generally ... because the expansion of gardens has kept up with population growth' (Sodhi 2008). This is a convenient but rather deceptive way of deflecting attention from favourable indicators, which might undermine the general argument that Solomon islanders are 'no better off'. UN data tells us that the percentage of the population that was undernourished fell from 33% in 1990-92 to 21% in 2002-04 (UNDP 2007: Table 7). Of course the sustaining nature of 'gardens' is underwritten by Melanesian customary land tenure, which ensures that the produce of those gardens is well distributed. Moore observes that subsistence production combined with 'selective cash

crops' have been 'the mainstay of rural communities for decades' and will remain so for some time. He suggests that building roads and other transport systems is central to improving rural livelihoods (Moore 2007: 191).

What of the other evidence on living standards? First, not all published data agrees with the proposition that there has been no long term economic growth. UNDP data says average annual GDP *per capita* growth between 1975 and 2005 was +1.1%; however the 1990 to 2005 figure was negative at -2.8% (UNDP 2007: Table 14). Certainly there has been strong population growth, averaging 2.6% per year in recent years (World Bank 2007), which makes it hard for *per capita* incomes to keep up. However, the fact that the country went through deep economic depression in the crisis of 1999 to 2002, with negative growth up to -14% per annum (World Bank 2008; see Table 1), makes averages rather misleading.

Second, other key indicators show some very slow but nevertheless distinct improvements in critical social indicators. Infant mortality fell substantially between 1986 and 1999 (the dates of two national censuses) and life expectancy rose by over 10% (see Table 2).

**Table 4: Some Critical Indicators, Solomon Islands 1986-1999**

Critical Indicator	1986	1999
Infant mortality	96	66
Total school enrolment (5-19)	34.8	56.3
Adult literacy	48.8	76.6 (?)
Life expectancy	54.6	61.1

Source: GSI (2002) *Solomon Islands Human Development Report 2002: building a nation*, Volume 1, Government of the Solomon Islands, Mark Otter, Brisbane, Tables A6, A7, A14

The suggested strong improvement in adult literacy is probably misleading though, as the census question 'can you read your bible' was most likely a matter of pride for most strongly Christian Solomon Islanders (Roughan 2008). Indeed, mass education is one of the Solomons' weak areas, with falling public investment in education (UNDP 2007: Table 11). Nevertheless, school enrolments seem to have

improved (Table 1) and there have been some improvements in health. Following a national plan, the malaria prevalence rate, at over 400 (per 1,000 persons) in 1992, had fallen to below 200 in 2001. These limited gains were made through the promotion of treated bed nets, targeted spraying and wider drug treatment. Similarly, tuberculosis infection, while still a serious problem, was reduced from 117 (per 100,000) in 1990 to 65 in 2000. The advances were largely through wider use of BCG vaccine (GSI 2002: 34-36).

The point of these figures is not to suggest that the Solomon Islands has good socio-economic indicators, or that it does not have serious deficits in health and education. Rather, the data contradicts the claim that Solomon Islanders are 'no better off' since decolonisation. These comparisons also point to the obsolete nature of average GDP figures as an measure of socio-economic welfare, and the need to take into account forms of social organisation, such as public health campaigns, and social assets such as well distributed customary land and mutual support systems.

We can see this disjuncture between economic growth and welfare precisely in the RAMSI experience. Economic growth in the Solomon Islands was given a boost by the presence of RAMSI, most notably in 2003 and 2004 (World Bank 2008). However, as we saw from the surveys and the inflationary elements of 'aid trauma', the economic perceptions of Solomon Islanders by 2006 were 'generally negative', with 87% of people complaining of high prices and 70% saying their economic situation 'was worse than the year before' (ANU Enterprise 2006: 6-9).

Finally, the value of independence cannot be measured in either simple economic terms, nor even through broader socio-economic indicators. Self-governance is a long term project which gradually undoes the damage of colonialism, which cripples the growth of human personality, blocks the development of indigenous public institutions, creates dependent social structures and aggravates poverty and inequality (e.g. Fanon 1961; Frank 1979; Iyer 2002). Political independence, and resistance to intervention, remains the central means of defending that healing process, as well as the gains made in reclaiming and maintaining control of land and other natural resources.

### **‘State building’ or Self-governance?**

RAMSI’s future is linked to the contest between indigenous claims for self-governance and modernist western notions that an outside force is capable of carrying out a process of ‘state building’. The latter view has been applied to other post-conflict societies. In the case of the Solomons in 2003, it was a country that had been independent for just twenty three years. It had set in its constitution important themes, such as the reclaiming of land and other natural resources. The crisis clearly indicates that the state was weak. Yet equally clearly, the process of state and nation-building was still underway when RAMSI arrived. The Solomon Islands, and other parts of Melanesia, had quite a ‘different trajectory’ of nation and state building than was imagined by western intervention theorists (Dinnen 2008: 6-7).

A range of issues have been suggested as elements of what is often called ‘national reconciliation’ in the Solomon Islands. These include constitutional reform, devolution of some powers to the provinces, infrastructure development, plantation development on Malaita, and clarification of land tenure patterns (e.g. Moore 2007: 178-192). The Sikaia government has made ‘national reconciliation’ its first priority, and continues the Sogavare government’s plan for an inquiry into land abandoned during the crisis (Alasia 2008). However, Australian and Solomon Islander views of this process, and RAMSI’s role in it, vary substantially.

After the tensions between Canberra and the Sogavare Government, RAMSI officials seemed to retreat into more politically correct and modest ambitions for the mission. The internal RAMSI review for 2007 does not speak of ‘state building’, but rather ‘capacity building’ and simply making a ‘contribution to the rebuilding’ of the country (Winter and Schofield 2007: 5, 14, 42-43). Wainwright, while maintaining her theme of state building, came to accept that ‘land tenure, reconciliation and decentralisation’ were outside the RAMSI brief (Wainwright 2003 & 2005). However, this boundary decision came after some struggle. There was resistance from the Sogavare government to an Australian push to include land tenure in the RAMSI mandate (Sogavare 2008).

Nevertheless, a strong Australian tradition of what could be called ‘deep interventionism’ remains. This links economic changes, in which Australian companies have interests, with the notion of ‘state building’. For example, Australian aid programs in the region (sometimes sponsored by Australian mining companies) have for many years included land registration and land ‘mobilisation’ projects (Rusanen 2005). That theme has been maintained in the Solomons, despite the constitutional bar on foreigners owning land. Australian diplomat Nick Warner, early on, spoke of ‘working together’ but also of RAMSI’s role in ‘nation building’ which included ‘fundamental economic reform’ (Warner 2004). In the same year, Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in its ‘medium term priorities’ for the Solomons, was urging a standard neoliberal formula: budget cuts (‘right sizing’), the privatisation of all state owned enterprises (‘as soon as possible’) and the registration and commercialisation of land (because ‘customary land ownership places serious constraints on the growth of new higher value private sector activities’) (DFAT 2004: 135). This line of argument was forced into retreat during the period of the Sogavare Government, through 2006-07.

There have also been some Australian critics of ‘state building’. Oxfam urged ‘reflection on the relevance of the imposed models of statehood, and the way that these models were established in the colonial transition’ (Oxfam/CAA 2003: 9). But the ‘state building’ enthusiasm persisted. After a series of interviews, mostly with Australians, Fullilove from the Lowy Institute maintained that RAMSI’s task was ‘rebuilding a fragile state’, and constructing an ‘innovative example of state building’; though he did recognise that an ‘exit strategy’ was required (2006: 4, 17-18). Morgan and McLeod (2006: 425) warned that the ‘roots of discontent continue to pervade the lives of Solomon Islanders’ and that these would pose an ‘ongoing challenge to the maintenance of social and political order, and consequently to Australia’s attempts to build a modern Solomon Islands state’. McMullan and Peebles (2006) attempted to recast RAMSI as a function of Australia’s ‘responsibility to protect’ a vulnerable neighbour. This moved away from the threatening stance of ‘failed state’ rhetoric, where uninvited intervention was seen as justified. However, it may suggest a deeper intervention than was contemplated. All such discussion simply begs the question of who is the nation builder.

A return to 'deep intervention' notions came with a report from Sodhi (2008). While critical of the 'aid caravan', he restated the argument for deeper intervention, referring to the country's economic stagnation since independence. RAMSI intervention was needed in economic issues, he said. Some of this (infrastructure building) interested the Solomon Islands Government, while some of it (land commercialisation) was clearly linked to the persistent claim of foreign investors for ownership of land:

RAMSI has concentrated its efforts on peripheral problems and ignored the real constraints to growth .. Agriculture is the key .. without land surveys, registration and long term leases there can be no progress. Without an economic growth outlook .. RAMSI has no exit strategy (Sodhi 2008).

While it was true that RAMSI had no public exit strategy, despite the confusing talk of 'state building', by 2008 it was doubtful that RAMSI carried sufficient political will for such deep intervention.

Critical Solomon Islands voices do not speak of a 'state building' role for RAMSI. They suggest the mission has a supportive role for the indigenous processes of reconciliation and nation building. RAMSI is mostly seen as a temporary, stabilising force. Early on, one Solomon Islander analyst noted that:

foreign intervention, while useful in the short term, does not offer an easy solution to internal problems. It might create a quasi-functioning state that is able to restore order ... but without addressing the underlying causes of unrest ... [the risk is] it will create a culture of dependency (Kabutaulaka 2004: 7).

These concerns were reflected by a leading community worker, who supports RAMSI for its security role in Honiara but thinks they should go when things are stable. 'As a mother', she says, 'I like the idea they are here, for example, with that last change of government' (which made Derek Sikua Prime Minister). She was fairly sure there would have been trouble in town. However, she sees problems of dependency if they are here too long. On RAMSI proposing changes to land tenure, she says 'we have enough land problems from outsiders'. She believes RAMSI should

go when the security and political situation has stabilised (Wate 2008).

The dominant role of Australia is an ongoing concern. Oxfam (2006: 22) noted that there ‘appears to be few – if any – opportunities for participation [in RAMSI] by the wider Solomon Islands public’. This seems to be quite deeply resented. While some disagreed with Prime Minister Sogavare’s style of confrontation with Canberra, these same people seemed to agree with much of its substance. Bishop Smith, for example, would prefer that RAMSI be controlled by the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). However ‘if it is just Australians .. it’s a difficult question. [Local people] like security but they don’t like seeing trucks of men with guns. If it is too Australian dominated – that’s not in the right direction’ (Smith 2008). Journalist Robert Iroga, who has studied and written on the process of reconciliation in the Solomons, thinks that RAMSI can be important in helping facilitate the process, and also perhaps help with logistics. However, it would be ‘out of place’ for them to participate in reconciliation. ‘Slowly, slowly, RAMSI’s job is working .. as we get more responsibility, they have [less need] to control’. He does not believe in longer term ‘law and order’ - or criminalisation - solutions. ‘Those who fought the war need to be involved’, and not just the government leaders. The reliance on money has ‘modernised’ the process, but money has been placed above custom. If it’s just money, it doesn’t come ‘from the heart’ and from the people that need to be involved, who bring it [money and ideas] to the process. The government might seek expert opinion from outsiders but ‘to find a really lasting option it must be home grown’ (Iroga 2008). He is speaking of self-governance.

### **Concluding Remarks**

RAMSI faces competing demands and some important constraints. Much of the Australian debate is still influenced by the shifting rationales that surrounded the heavily resisted invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, claims of a global ‘war against terrorism’ and missions of ‘state building’. Most of this is irrelevant and misleading in the case of the Solomon Islands. Some Australian observers recognise that only modest achievements in security assistance and assisting the facilitation of the domestic process

can be achieved. Others are taking the opportunity to urge deeper intervention, to open investment opportunities through privatisation and land commercialisation. This would likely provoke conflict and further attacks on the integrity of RAMSI.

In the Solomons there is one group that would like to see the back of the Australian-dominated mission, another that would like to divert RAMSI into broader aid programs, and a group in between which wants the security reassurance of RAMSI but is hurt by the inflationary bubble economy, failures of institution building and the relative deprivation that accompanies such a large scale, foreign aid caravan. Taken together, we could call these the elements of an 'aid trauma', which may become more apparent the longer this 'emergency mission' stays.

The Australian presence, for its part, is constrained by RAMSI's notional multilateral character (Australia cannot act alone, without consulting other PIF members) and by bureaucratic inertia. Many of those involved have a strong interest to maintain their 'mission'. Aid workers, soldiers, police, and contracted companies all have substantial benefits (or 'loadings') on top of their salaries. Some are said to be investing in additional property at home through their very high salaries, which all contribute to the headline figure of 'aid' to the Solomon Islands.

Efforts are made to not disaggregate this 'headline aid' figure. When the then Secretary of the Solomon Islands Prime Minister's Department, Dr John Roughan, raised some questions about the RAMSI budget, former Foreign Minister Alexander Downer gave a dramatic, 'take it or leave it' reply: 'Which part of the \$800 million don't you want?' (Roughan 2008). If Dr Roughan had been less polite he might have mentioned the part that was inflated Australian salaries.

It is not hard to imagine why many of those involved in RAMSI might want to stay, and might want to defend their mission as a valuable one. The Australian Federal Police (AFP), for example, through its involvement in several overseas missions (including Afghanistan, Timor Leste and the Solomons), between 2002 and 2007, more than doubled its budget and doubled its personnel. Further, the number of AFP executives paid over A\$200,000 per year rose from 5 to 40 in that same period (see Table 3). In these circumstances, with an extra half billion dollars in



resources (18% of that from privatised operations), the AFP can hardly claim to be providing disinterested advice about its own future role in RAMSI.

**Table 5: Australian Federal Police-  
Expansion in Resources, 2002-2007**

	<b>2001-02 (\$,000)</b>	<b>2006-07 (\$,000)</b>
<b>Total revenue</b>	408,584	1,082,350
<b>From government</b>	303,790	873,580
<b>From sale of goods and services</b>	102,211	185,478
<b>Average staff levels</b>	2,913	5,919
<b>No. of staff paid more than A\$100K/A\$130K*</b>	31	62*
<b>No. of staff paid more than A\$200K p.a.</b>	5	40

*Sources:* AFP 2002: 137, 162; AFP 2007: 161, 192

In the Solomons, former Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare has urged a review of RAMSI, separating it from new aid programs and reducing it to its police elements (Sogavare 2008). On the other hand, Prime Minister Derek Sikua has urged RAMSI to expand its role in rural areas, and ‘will seek RAMSI assistance to implement the Government’s rural development policy’ (SIG 2008). Acting RAMSI coordinator Jonathan Austin responded cautiously, saying the mission’s role was defined by the Solomons Government and the PIF. In response to the ‘deep interventionists’, Austin said RAMSI cannot ‘unilaterally’ begin reforms in such areas as land tenure. RAMSI had been given a strict mandate, he said, in three areas of law and order, economic governance and machinery of government. (Solomon Star 2008: 2). This was not really true: RAMSI had been given a very wide mandate, and issues such as land commercialisation had indeed been raised, but resistance from the SIG that sidelined those issues.

RAMSI has no clear exit strategy. Its internal review for 2007 observed that the mission would benefit from ‘tighter objectives’ but worried that discussion of ‘exit strategies’ can be ‘confrontational’ and ‘political’ (Winter and Schofield 2007: 5, 14, 42-43). While there is no urgent pressure for an exit strategy, its absence saps RAMSI of purpose and

efficiency. On proposals for 'deep intervention', there does not seem to be the political will, for example, to meet Australian corporate demands for a move on the very popular customary land tenure. Whatever Canberra wants, it is constrained by the PIF. For their part, both the previous and the current Solomon Island Governments are committed to a commission of inquiry into abandoned properties and land, to deal with land abandoned during the crisis. But this does not have a wider agenda (Alasia 2008). RAMSI attempting a move on customary land tenure would likely generate substantial resistance in the Solomons.

In these circumstances, RAMSI retains a fair measure of local support while it remains identified with security, despite the blow to its credibility in April 2006. It faces significant resentment and the threat of destabilisation if it seeks to move into deeper, structural intervention. The Australian Labor Government, attempting to build a new relationship with the Solomons after the acrimony of the Howard Government years, has promised an increase in Pacific aid, particularly in education and training (Rudd 2007). After a year, little of this has materialised. Nevertheless, in current circumstances new aid programs might best be organised on a bilateral basis, and not confused with the specific mandate of RAMSI. If the mission is really about 'helpem fren', it would best be gradually wound down, aiming to leave at a time when Solomon Island communities express their confidence in resuming the task of self-governance. Nation building is for the people of that nation.

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