



Australian Intervention in the Solomons: Beyond Operation Helpem Fren

An Agenda for Development in the Solomon Islands

August 2003

Executive Summary	i
Introduction	1
Part One: Background to the current situation – understanding the causes	3
1. <i>Armed conflict</i>	3
2. <i>Ongoing unrest</i>	3
3. <i>Family and gender-based violence</i>	4
4. <i>Diversity</i>	4
5. <i>Demographic change</i>	5
6. <i>Displacement</i>	5
7. <i>Internal migration</i>	5
8. <i>Land</i>	5
9. <i>Colonial transition and governance</i>	6
10. <i>Economic decline</i>	6
Part Two: The Australian context	8
1. <i>Rationale for the Mission</i>	8
2. <i>Raising expectations</i>	8
3. <i>Concern over sovereignty and neo-colonialism</i>	8
4. <i>A “failed state”?</i>	9
Part Three: RAMSI - making it work	10
<i>Program Priority 1: Civil society engagement</i>	11
Support to civil society as an Instrument for good governance	11
<i>Program Priority 2: Addressing the causes</i>	12
Rural opportunities	12
Land and culture	13
Overcoming family and community origins of violence	14
An Appropriate bureaucracy	14
Effective education	15
Support to health services	15
<i>Program Priority 3: Community peace building</i>	16
Women’s peace building initiatives	16
Restorative justice	17
<i>Program Priority 4: Operation Helpem Fren</i>	18
Access to information	18
Appropriate conduct	19
No amnesty for past crimes	20
Civil military cooperation	21

Executive Summary

In July 2003, an international police and military force, led by Australia and supported by New Zealand and other Pacific Island nations, was deployed to the Solomon Islands in *Operation Helpem Fren*. The deployment is the first stage of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), a longer-term “cooperative intervention” to address the crisis of development and governance in the Solomon Islands.

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad welcomes the increased Australian commitment to helping the Solomon Islands. The intervention was invited by the Solomon Islands Prime Minister, and there is no doubt it is widely supported by its people. We welcome the police and military intervention, believing it has already acted as a circuit breaker, led to significant disarmament and an increased respect for the rule of law. But if RAMSI is to make a sustainable difference in the lives of Solomon Islanders, then it must be accompanied by an investment in longer-term development.

In looking beyond the immediate military intervention, Oxfam Community Aid Abroad believes that the imperative will be a broader program of development support that focuses on both the causes and the results of the current situation. The proposed priority areas of RAMSI – support for the rule of law, budget stabilisation and economic reform – will only address some of these issues. They are necessary but not sufficient. In the long term, RAMSI must focus on a much broader development agenda if it is to achieve sustainable improvements in the lives of Solomon Islanders.

This report draws on Oxfam Community Aid Abroad’s experience in the Solomon Islands and elsewhere to outline such an agenda for RAMSI to maximise opportunities for renewed and sustainable development in the Solomon Islands.

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad has worked with local organisations in the Solomon Islands to implement programs focusing on literacy, rural livelihoods, basic service delivery, and community peace building for the past two decades. Oxfam Community Aid Abroad has a permanent country office in the Solomon Islands which focuses on addressing the causes of conflict in communities. This paper is informed by our long experience in the Solomons Islands and elsewhere, and by the views of our partner organisations and the civil society sector in the Solomon Islands.

Within the RAMSI framework there is a commitment to an expanded development program with a proposed focus on support to the rule of law, stabilising the budget, and economic reform. It is imperative that the long-term RAMSI program is developed based on an informed understanding of the root causes of the current crisis in the Solomon Islands.

The interaction of local struggles for power and resources - particularly land, paid employment and services – and global economic trends in trade and aid which disadvantage small island developing states have brought about what is essentially a political and social conflict. RAMSI’s stated focus on law and justice problems, the shortcomings of public institutions, and economic imperatives, needs to be balanced by a deeper analysis that considers the root causes of the current situation in the Solomon Islands. These include:

- Lack of employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas.
- Youth disenfranchisement and vulnerability to militarisation.
- Conflicting perceptions of land and development, particularly in relation to resource extraction.
- Internal displacement and migration – both as a cause and effect of conflict.
- The social and economic pressures of rapid population growth and a young population.
- Constructs of “statehood” and governance and the legacy of the colonial period.
- An increasing culture of violence characterised by petty crime, property damage, theft, public drunkenness, and sexual and family violence.
- The implications of cultural and ethnic diversity for nation building.

There have been early successes towards RAMSI's aim to restore law and order to the Solomon Islands. The people of the Solomon Islands hope that the intervention will create a space in which the root causes of the violence and conflict can be addressed. A key strategy for achieving sustainable peace is to facilitate a process whereby Solomon Islanders themselves can shape the long-term RAMSI development program. In order to achieve this outcome, as well as focusing on the publicly documented agenda of support to the rule of law, stabilising the budget and economic reform, RAMSI should:

- Actively seek to work with civil society in all aspects of its programming, both in relation to the law and justice component and the long-term assistance package. This is because an active civil society can help promote good governance, and because civil society organisations (including church, community, and non-government organisations) have established links to the communities and are an important source of local knowledge.
- Recognise the important role that Solomon Islands' women have played in peace building, providing for their families, and responding to the needs arising from the conflict, and mainstream a gender perspective in all development initiatives, programs and projects.
- Emphasise the importance of consultation with communities. Community consultation should reflect the make-up of the community: men, women, youth, and different ethnic and social groups. Otherwise development initiatives will reinforce, rather than break down, inequalities within society and within communities.
- Ensure that the police and military deployment is conscious of its potential impacts on Solomon Islands' society. The operation must insist on cultural and gender sensitivity, allow time and resources for adequate information flows to the people of the Solomon Islands, and model appropriate conduct at all times.

Operation Helpem Fren is responding to problems with Solomon Islands' governance which results in massive insecurity, widespread economic hardship and civil disorder. In order to achieve sustainable change, the RAMSI long-term development program should address the causes of unrest in the Solomon Islands by focusing on interventions in the following seven areas:

- **Rural opportunities** Identify and support programs which address the identified needs of rural youth, including lack of rural employment, limited education opportunities, drug and alcohol use/abuse, sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, unplanned pregnancies, family violence, polygamy, and loss of identity. Existing programs such as Save the Children Australia's Youth Outreach Project and Kastom Garden's Youth Livelihoods Project can provide useful lessons.
- **Land and culture:** Explore options for formalising customary land ownership and registration which are mindful of Pacific perceptions of land, land ownership systems, and gender implications of land registration programs.
- **Family and community violence:** Recognise that the culture of violence commences within communities and support organisations which undertake community-based work to eliminate family and community violence.
- **An appropriate bureaucracy:** Draw on Solomon Islanders, Pacific islands technical experts, consultants, and volunteer development workers as part of the program of institutional support. Support Solomon Islands involvement in establishing governance systems with specific skill-building programs and exposure and study visits.
- **Health and education:** Prioritise support for basic services, particularly for rural areas, recognising the important contribution of civil society organisations. Build HIV awareness, prevention, advocacy and support mechanisms into all RAMSI initiatives beginning with the law and justice program.
- **Community peace building:** Integrate community peace building initiatives into all efforts to build lasting peace in the Solomon Islands, and consult widely with and actively involve civil society, including women's groups and female community leaders, customary and church

leaders, and youth in the peace process. Specifically draw on the experience and expertise of Solomon Islands' women and women focused organisations in conflict resolution, for example SICA, Women's Federation, Family Support Centre, Vois Blong Mere, National Council of Women.

- **Restorative justice:** Extend work with Solomon Islands Government in the field of restorative justice, including alternative sentencing, and explore opportunities for integrating customary systems and institutions of justice with Western judicial structures. Experiences from Bougainville, East Timor, and other Pacific countries may be useful. Provide financial and technical support for training in reconciliation, protection from violence, trauma counselling and appropriate indigenous counselling methods.

As a large-scale police and military intervention it is important that RAMSI does not contribute to or cause additional disruption to Solomon Islanders. RAMSI should be conducted in a culturally and gender sensitive manner, allow time and resources for adequate information flows to the people of the Solomon Islands, and model appropriate conduct at all times. Accordingly RAMSI should:

- **Provide access to information:** Publicity and outreach to inform the wider public about the timing and format of the international deployment and subsequent development policies and programs will be an important communications strategy, also involving face to face community meetings facilitated by local civil society organisations.
- **Ensure training of RAMSI personnel:** Organisations such as the Pacific Women's Network Against Violence Against Women and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre can provide training to police and military personnel both in terms of their conduct, and in terms of programming opportunities that bring in women's important role in peace keeping. Pidgin training should be available for all overseas forces deployed in Solomon Islands.
- **Monitor appropriate conduct:** Senior *Operation Helpem Fren* officers should monitor and prohibit acts of sexual violence, prostitution and harassment of women by international peacekeeping forces. A reporting mechanism for inappropriate behaviour, or general community concerns, should be established. In Bougainville, regular meetings with NGOs and community groups facilitated a two-way reporting process.
- **Maximise civil-military cooperation:** A dedicated Civil-Military Cooperation office with a gender-balanced staff should operate in the Solomon Islands to enhance the relationship between the civilian, NGO and military sectors.
- **Provide clear military-humanitarian delineation:** Military should appear in uniform at all times to avoid problematic issues of civilian perception which may lead to security issues for NGOs. Any delivery of humanitarian relief should be through those organisations mandated to do so.

Introduction

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad has supported local organisations to implement programs focusing on literacy, rural livelihoods, and basic service delivery in the Solomon Islands for the past two decades. Oxfam Community Aid Abroad's program was significantly expanded following the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement in August 2001 with the commencement of a Community Peace Building Program. This program was developed in response to the call for greater community participation to support the peace process.

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad has a permanent country office in the Solomon Islands which works with local organisations to implement projects to address the causes of conflict in communities. These include rural employment and livelihoods initiatives, farmer networks, small business training and youth sporting, cultural and social events. Through the country office, community leaders and local organisations can also access support for training in conflict resolution, restorative justice, mediation, and reconciliation.

This report draws on Oxfam Community Aid Abroad's experience in the Solomon Islands and elsewhere to outline an agenda for the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) to maximise opportunities for renewed development in the Solomon Islands.

In July 2003, an international police and military force, led by Australia and supported by New Zealand and other Pacific Island nations, was deployed to the Solomon Islands in *Operation Helpem Fren* ("helping friends" in the national language, Solomon Islands Pidgin). The initial military deployment is the first stage of RAMSI, a longer-term "cooperative intervention" to address the crisis of development and governance that erupted in 1998. Australia's Prime Minister John Howard has reported that Australia's contribution to the Mission would be over AUD\$200 million this financial year.¹ The Australian contribution comprises approximately 1,500 Australian Defence Force personnel, 155 Australian Federal Police and 80 staff from the Australian Protective Services as well as officials drawn from other government departments. These personnel will be part of a total mission that will comprise about 2,225 people.

RAMSI was invited by the Solomon Islands government and unanimously approved by Foreign Ministers and leaders from the 16 member states of the Pacific Island Forum at a meeting in Sydney on 30 June 2003. RAMSI has been welcomed by the majority of Solomon Islanders, who see the short-term deployment of overseas police and military forces as acting as a circuit breaker and addressing failures of policing, corruption and instances of violence. Early indications of the progress of RAMSI are positive, as the Governor of the Solomon Islands Reserve Bank Rick Hou noted in August 2003:

Since the arrival of RAMSI personnel in Honiara, there is already a very new kind of feeling and general positive and encouraging atmosphere around the country. Especially in Honiara, the public is now able to go about their normal business in an orderly fashion, with an air of relaxation and more freedom. In a short space of time, the rule of law appears to now be taking a hold.²

But the overwhelming welcome for the intervention has masked many Solomon Islands' voices, who are urging caution about the duration of the military and police deployment, the manner in which corruption and lawlessness will be addressed, and the need for long-term development programs that prioritise education, health and sustainable livelihoods.

Australia has offered an in-principle commitment to a long-term expanded development program in the Solomon Islands. According to Foreign Minister Alexander Downer:

¹ Prime Minister John Howard, Ministerial Statement to Parliament on the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), 12 August 2003. <<http://www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech422.html>>

² Rick Hou, "Solomon Islands - Update on Various issues", 4 August 2003, unpublished.

...what we have said is that there needs to be very substantially increased support for the treasury, the finance department, the customs department and, in the area of law and justice, for the magistracy, the rebuilding of the Rove prison and the list goes on.³

What this list includes beyond the law and justice items is not yet clear. At a briefing for non-government organisation (NGO) representatives on 8 July 2003, the long-term package was presented as focusing on:

- **Support to the rule of law:** encompassing the justice system, magistrate's court, public solicitors office, police prosecutions, and prisons service.
- **Stabilising the budget:** looking at problems like the public service not getting paid, extortion payments, trying to strengthen revenue capture, working on audit and public service commission.
- **Economic reform:** likely to be based on the Australian led multi-donor economic governance framework for the Solomon Islands which has recently been developed.

The Prime Minister has also referred to long-term commitments:

Australian...officials may be engaged for several years. This will be at a cost which I believe Australians would wish our country to bear... We are committed to working with our fellow members of the Pacific Islands Forum to address the challenges of the Region.⁴

As yet, little further information is available about the long-term program of assistance to the Solomon Islands, which is still in a formative stage. The central purpose of this paper is to emphasise the need for a long-term program that effectively addresses the causes of conflict and social upheaval in the Solomon Islands; and to highlight the need for, and benefits of, ensuring Solomon Islanders' maximum involvement in and ownership of the program. Without such a program, the potential remains for long-standing conflicts to resurface once the military intervention is over. Specific humanitarian considerations in relation to the deployment of forces as part of *Operation Helpem Fren* also need to be articulated and managed.

This report is presented in three parts. Part One provides a background to the current situation, including the underlying causes of the current social unrest. Part Two discusses the Australian context for the deployment, analysing the debates about neo-colonialism and sovereignty, and the "failed state" rationale for the intervention. Part Three outlines the critical elements of a recommended long-term development program in the Solomon Islands under RAMSI.

³ Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, "Statement to Parliament on the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands", 12 August 2003. <http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/transcripts/2003/030812_downer_in_pment.html>

⁴ Prime Minister John Howard, Ministerial Statement to Parliament on the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), 12 August 2003. <<http://www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/speech422.html>>

Part One: Background to the current situation – understanding the causes

Both internal and external factors have created the current situation in the Solomon Islands. These must be understood in order to define a program of assistance that can achieve lasting peace and stability. Imposing an externally developed structure for achieving law and order, economic stability and development, rather than building on the foundations for these objectives that are innate in Solomon Islands society, risks repeating some of the mistakes that are at the core of the Solomon Islands conflict.

1. Armed conflict

Armed conflict erupted in the Solomon Islands in 1998 between the Isatabu Freedom Movement of Guadalcanal and the Malaita Eagle Force and led to more than 100 deaths. In June 2000, Malaitan militants and elements of the police force broke open the police armouries and took over the capital Honiara, deposing the government of Prime Minister Bart Ulufa'alu. Although armed clashes are not continuing at the same rate as in 1998-9, there are ongoing instances of violent conflict, especially on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, and an estimated 250 people have been killed over the last five years.

Media commentators often present Solomon Islands conflicts simply as “ethnic” clashes – Guadalcanal islanders versus Malaitans. But debates over identity and ethnicity take place in a broader context of economic change affected by globalisation, corruption and the failure of a development model based on exploitation of natural resources, like timber and fisheries. The genesis of the current crisis is not a matter of “tribalism” or “ethnic violence”. It is a political and social conflict arising from the interaction of local struggles for power and resources - particularly land, paid employment and services – and global economic trends in trade and aid which disadvantage small island developing states.⁵

2. Ongoing unrest

The Australian Government has claimed a number of successes in addressing the crisis arising from the armed conflict and the overthrow of the Ulufa'alu Government in June 2000. These include:

- Negotiating the October 2000 Townsville Peace Agreement, which saw the warring militias pull back from full-scale civil war;
- Creating the Peace Monitoring Council (now called the National Peace Council) which, supported by the International Peace Monitoring Team, enabled peace efforts to become established;
- Collecting and destroying some 2,000 weapons;
- The 2001 elections, which saw the election of Prime Minister Sir Allan Kemakeza.⁶

The peace process had stalled in the period leading up to RAMSI; there were ongoing allegations of corruption by government ministers and senior government officials, and the weapons hand-back had slowed. Hundreds of high-powered guns remained in the hands of former militants. Criminal behaviour by these young men has become a serious concern for local communities, and the militarisation of youth poses significant problems in rural areas.

⁵ Greg Fry, "Political legitimacy and the post-colonial state in the Pacific: reflections on some common threads in the Fiji and Solomon Islands coups", *Pacific Review*, Vol. 12, no. 3, October 2000, pp. 295 – 304.

⁶ Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, "Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the future of Solomon Islands", Speech at the launch of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute report, Sydney, 10 June 2003.

Since the Townsville Peace Agreement, there has been a series of major setbacks to the peace and reconciliation process, including:

- The August 2002 killing of a Government Minister, Father Augustine Geve, allegedly by Weather Coast militant Harold Keke;
- The February 2003 murder in Auki of Sir Fred Soaki, a peace activist with the National Peace Council and formerly the first locally appointed police commissioner; and
- The May 2003 beheading of Australian Seventh Day Adventist missionary Lance Gersbach, which raised the profile of the crisis in Australia in a way that the deaths of dozens of Solomon Islanders had failed to do.⁷

Less prominent in the media was the ongoing social unrest, characterised by petty crime, property damage, theft, public drunkenness, and sexual and family violence. While often not highly visible, it is this ongoing constraint to Solomon Islanders getting on with their daily lives, that has engendered much of the support for the deployment of *Operation Helpem Fren*.

3. Family and gender-based violence

To date during the intervention, addressing the visible aspects of law and order appears to have been relatively straightforward. However, it is imperative to also address the less visible aspects which underlie the conflict. A holistic approach to conflict resolution and peace building must address the root causes of violence and conflict in the wider community; not just between the warring parties.

Gender violence, particularly domestic violence and sexual assault, is a major issue of concern in the Pacific region, and women's NGOs are joining forces in their quest to eliminate violence against women. Through the efforts of the Pacific Women's Network Against Violence Against Women, a network linking women's organisations in 13 Pacific Island countries, the issue of violence against women is now being debated and discussed at the national and regional levels in several Pacific states.⁸

Changing attitudes towards gender and family violence

The Family Support Centre (FSC), a member of the Pacific Women's Network Against Violence Against Women, was established in 1995 to address the high incidence of domestic violence, sexual assault and child abuse in the Solomon Islands. FSC is supported by Oxfam New Zealand and Oxfam Community Aid Abroad.

From 1997 to 2000, FSC conducted 58 awareness-raising workshops throughout the provinces, which were attended by 4,670 people. As a result, more Solomon Islanders are aware of the issues raised by gender and domestic violence, and have stressed the importance of the work FSC is undertaking in the Solomon Islands. Importantly, police attitudes towards domestic violence are changing, and more officers are treating domestic violence as a crime, not a personal matter.

4. Diversity

The population of the Solomon Islands is currently estimated to be 450,000. An estimated 94 per cent are Melanesian and there are small Polynesian, Micronesian, Chinese and European communities. There are 87 distinct languages and numerous dialects spoken in the Solomon Islands. English is the official language but Solomon Islands Pidgin is the common language for the majority of the people. Kinship, defined by language and culture as well as family, is the cement of Solomon Islands communities.

⁷ Mary Louise O'Callaghan, "Australian missionary beheaded in Solomons", *The Australian*, 19 May 2003; "Missionary doomed by ignorance" *The Australian*, 20 May 2003

⁸ Information on the Pacific Women's Network can be found in the quarterly newsletter *Pacific Women Against Violence* or at www.fijiwomen.com. See also "Non-government organisations and domestic violence", section three in Sinclair Dinnen and Allison Ley (eds.), *Reflections on Violence in Melanesia*, Federation Press, Leichhardt, 2000.

This cultural and ethnic diversity has salient implications for nation building and the authority of the state and its capacity to implement national policies; the divisions along linguistic, regional and ethnic lines are real and influence public opinion and decisions about development.⁹

5. Demographic change

The 1999 census results characterised the Solomon Islands population as young - 41.5 per cent of Solomon Islanders are under 15. Young men are the most vulnerable to being recruited into militant groups. Changing population structures are also associated with increasing inter-generational rift, and a lack of opportunities for young people.

The country has a population growth rate of 2.8 per cent per year, which is among the highest in the world. Rapid population growth hampers government ability to provide adequate health and education services, and increases pressure on farming land leading to over-farming and difficulties in securing sustainable food and livelihood security.

6. Displacement

An estimated 35,000 persons (nine per cent of the national population) were forced from their homes during the 1998-1999 conflict. It is estimated that 30,000 persons were still displaced in early 2002, most of them in Malaita, Guadalcanal and in the Western province. The main obstacles to their return are the disarmament of former parties to the conflict, an extremely depressed national economy and the consequent lack of jobs for both the displaced and resident populations.¹⁰

7. Internal migration

Increased internal migration within the Solomon Islands brings with it a breakdown in kinship systems and societal controls, as well as a loss of local identity and sense of belonging. Oxfam Community Aid Abroad's Country Program has found that disruption of social cohesion in society, particularly the breakdown of the family as a fundamental social unit, is both a result of and a perpetuating factor for the conflict.

Colonial-era natural resource exploitation (timber, fisheries and copra) provided a catalyst to internal migration, as people moved from outlying islands to towns to join the cash economy.¹¹ Following the end of the Second World War, Malaitans moved in large numbers to Honiara in search of employment, particularly in the plantation sector. They have since come to dominate Honiara as a political and economic force, contributing to ethnic tensions with the local Guadalcanal people.

The lack of opportunity, particularly in rural areas, continues to promote internal migration. Approximately 85 per cent of the population live in rural areas – mostly in small village-based communities. Resource depletion and the increasing inadequacy of subsistence agriculture systems leads people to seek paid employment, of which there are few openings. Even in 1999 when the last reliable figures were available, only 23 per cent of the population of 14 years of age and over were involved in paid work.¹²

8. Land

Eighty-seven per cent of the land in the Solomon Islands is under customary ownership. It is usually owned by the clan or line, and not just by an individual, and traditionally cannot be bought and sold like other marketable commodities. The concept of individual ownership with the right to sell land was

⁹ Norwegian Refugee Council/Global IDP Project, *Profile of Internal Displacement: Solomon Islands*, NRC/IDP, May 2002

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, "Deforestation and politics in Solomon Islands", in Peter Larmour (ed.), *Governance and reform in the South Pacific*, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, pp. 121 – 153.

¹² Solomon Islands Census Office, *Solomon Islands 1999 Population and Housing Census Main Results, Report to the Government of the Solomon Islands*, Government of Solomon Islands, 1999.

introduced and in the early days of the British administration and has been the cause of some present-day conflicts over land. The Right Reverend Terry Brown, Bishop of Malaita comments:

There is no current system of legally registering (customary land) with clear boundaries, genealogies and land trusts. The result is an endless string of land disputes dividing communities and bringing on violence.¹³

9. Colonial transition and governance

The Solomon Islands gained its independence in 1978, and is therefore a very young state still trying to deal with the legacies of British colonial rule. These include national boundaries that arbitrarily divide linguistic and cultural groups, and an externally developed Westminster system of governance. Pre-independence the colonial government itself recognised that the Westminster system might be unsuitable for an independent Solomon Islands because of the sacredness of islands; poor communications; shortage of qualified people; small population; diverse cultures; lack of national unity; and dependence on foreign aid.¹⁴ Consultation about an alternative did occur to some extent, but without the necessary exposure to what those alternatives might be and support to developing local leaders' skills in integrating indigenous concepts of power, authority and decision making.¹⁵

The creation of the "state" across traditional forms of authority and administration and across culturally and linguistically diverse societies worked well while people received benefits from central government – roads, schools, health centres and other services.¹⁶ However there is increasing disillusionment with government policies and leadership caused by a number of factors, including the inability of governments to meet community expectations, particularly of rural populations, youth and women; falling standards of basic services; and corruption and financial mismanagement by ministers and senior officials.¹⁷

Constitution Development: Lessons from East Timor

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad has worked with civil society organisations in East Timor to secure a real opportunity for people's views on the key issues to be reflected in the drafting of the Constitution.

In developing this program Oxfam Community Aid Abroad recognised that to ensure constitutional legitimacy men and women have to be provided with information on what a Constitution is, what choices have to be made, and what options are available to them. Time is then needed for consideration and debate so that opinions can be formed and articulated. Mechanisms then need to be in place to allow for those views to be heard by future constitution-makers and finally incorporated into the Constitution.

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad particularly supported the East Timorous Gender and Constitution Working Group. The Working Group used the media to inform communities about gender issues, and lobbied members of the Constituent Assembly. 95 per cent of the issues the Working Group campaigned for were included in the draft constitution.

10. Economic decline

The Asian Development Bank estimates that the Solomon Islands had a 15-20 per cent drop in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in just one year in 1997-8, partly due to withdrawal of capital after the financial crash in Asia.¹⁸ The economy has never fully recovered and significant foreign investment

¹³ The Rt .Rev'd Terry Brown, Bishop of Malaita, Church of Melanesia "Ten ways to assist SI", *Solomon Star*, 29 July 2003

¹⁴ Peter Lamour, "Westminster in the Pacific: A 'Policy Transfer' Approach" *State Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper* 2001/1, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, ANU, Canberra.

¹⁵ Y. Ghai, "The Making of the Independence Constitution" in P. Larmour, (ed.), *Solomon Island Politics*, University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1983, p.50.

¹⁶ C. Jourdan, "Stepping stones to national consciousness: the Solomon Islands case", in R. Foster (ed.), *Nation Making Emergent Identities in Postcolonial Melanesia*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, pp. 127 – 150.

¹⁷ Peter Larmour, *Issues and Mechanisms of Accountability: Examples from Solomon Islands*, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper no. 00/1, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 2000.

¹⁸ Office of Pacific Operations, Asian Development Bank, *Impact of the Asian financial crisis on PMDC economies*, ADB, Manila, 1998.

has departed, except for logging and fishing companies unfettered by effective government control and taxation.

Today, Solomon Islands' foreign debt is a record AU\$352 million, with major ramifications for the provision of basic social services. By August 2003, the country's external reserves rose to nearly AU\$30 million, representing little more than two months of import cover. Even after significant staff retrenchments in late 2002, public sector workers continue to experience lengthy delays in payment of salaries. Utilities and communications are regularly out of service because the government has failed to pay bills.

Part Two: The Australian context

Operation Helpem Fren occurs in a climate of increasing policy debate about Australia's relationship with the Pacific. The way that the Mission is presented within this debate has important implications for the way it is perceived in the Solomon Islands and therefore for its long-term support.

1. Rationale for the Mission

Justification for the Mission commonly includes reference to Australia's responsibility in the Pacific and to Australia's own security concerns. The recently released Senate Inquiry into Australia's relations with PNG and the Pacific states that "Australia has an obligation to assist Pacific states to protect their security and stimulate their economies".¹⁹ Key elements of the case presented to policy makers in Canberra and the broader public in Australia have focused on the potential for the Solomon Islands to become a base for drug-smuggling, gun running and, less plausibly, al-Aida terror attacks.

The Australian Government's willingness to deploy troops, police and other personnel has changed markedly since requests for policing assistance were made by the Solomon Islands Government in 2000, and rejected by the Australian Government. Intervening events, such as September 11, the Bali bombing, and the invasion of Iraq, have changed the context for Australia's relations with neighbouring Asia-Pacific countries and international institutions like the United Nations. The appointment of Mr. Nick Warner, the newly appointed ambassador for counter-terrorism, as leader of RAMSI, reflects the way this deployment has been framed within the so-called "war on terror."²⁰

It is vitally important for the Australian Government to carefully consider how the language used to describe activities undertaken through the intervention will be interpreted in the Solomon Islands and other Pacific states. An over-emphasis on the potential for terrorist operatives basing themselves in Solomon Islands risks undermining Pacific support for the intervention, and distorting priorities for allocating resources to the long-term development problems which have caused the crisis.

2. Raising expectations

Discussion of the Mission's long-term commitment must also be mindful of the expectations this raises in the Solomon Islands. There is concern that this commitment will not be maintained in the long-term. Prominent civil society spokesperson Matthew Wale has noted:

Australia must be fully aware of the high expectations it has created within the Solomon Islands society...The Australian Government has announced a long-term commitment of ten years and at a cost of \$850 million Australian dollars. However, we must note that the Australian government commitment may be affected by its internal politics – the politics of budgetary issues, and the much feared politics of public opinion...Ten years is a long time for the Australian public to remain focused and committed to the Pacific and the Solomon Islands.²¹

The long-term view of this Mission is essential, but it must also be realistic. Broad engagement of international non-government and church based organisations will assist maintain continuity in programming in the longer term.

3. Concern over sovereignty and neo-colonialism

Both the Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer have rejected any accusations that the policy towards the Solomon Islands crisis represents a form of neo-colonialism:

¹⁹ Parliament of Australia Senate, "Chapter One: Introduction and conduct of the inquiry" in *A Pacific engaged: Australia's relations with Papua New Guinea and the island states of the south-west Pacific*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2003. p.8.

²⁰ Mary Louise O'Callaghan, "Terror supremo sent to Honiara", *The Australian*, 19-20 July 2003.

²¹ Matthew Wale, "The proposed Australian-led Intervention force", photocopy, June 2003.

Australia is not a neo-colonial power and we are sensitive to the regional concerns about our role. But we will not sit back and watch while a country slips inexorably into decay and disorder.²²

The suggestion that Island states are not viable has raised suspicions about Australia's long-term motives for the intervention. The initial welcome should not blind policy makers to Solomon Islanders' concerns over breach of sovereignty. On 24 July 2003, Development Services Exchange, an umbrella body for NGOs, stated:

We also note our concern about the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands and especially the bypassing of Parliament, the voice of the people. The Prime Minister left Honiara secretly, went to Australia and announced that he was asking Australia to intervene. At this stage, Parliament and the people were in the dark...We expect the strengthening process to see the voice of the people through Parliament to be strengthened, so that decisions are not made by the Executive without referring issues to Parliament and the people.²³

With its initial requirement for the Solomon Islands' parliamentary approval for the intervention and subsequent engagement of Pacific Island leaders in support for the intervention, RAMSI has demonstrated an early commitment to avoiding labels of neo-colonialism. This challenge will continue for RAMSI, which must now ensure that the people of the Solomon Islands – whether they be elected Members of Parliament, non-government, church, or community representatives – are actively involved in determining the nature of the long-term intervention.

4. A “failed state”?

On 10 June 2003, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) released *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of the Solomon Islands*, a report which served as an important catalyst to mobilise support for the intervention in Canberra and amongst the Australian public.²⁴

A central element of ASPI's argument for an Australian-led intervention in the Solomon Islands was that the country is a “failed state”, and that the ongoing lack of effective governance in Honiara opens the way for serious threats to Australia from terrorism, drug smuggling or gun-running:

Despite our efforts, the continued viability of PNG, the Solomons and Vanuatu as nation states is now uncertain. Their Governments are weak, transient and hard to deal with. Corruption is rife and control over territory is uncertain. Economies are stagnant and law and order is poor. Their ability to resist penetration by outsiders – whether states or non-state entities – is almost nil. This poses an urgent problem for Australia...These countries are also potential havens for terrorist groups.²⁵

The ASPI report mirrors a range of proposals over the last decade that suggest Pacific nations may be following the path of “failed states” in Africa. However, Pacific conflicts have their own dynamic and African comparisons are not always valid.²⁶

The concept of the “failed state” is now part of a foreign policy discourse increasingly used to justify intervention. Applying this concept so readily in the Pacific masks the fact that what is needed is reflection on the relevance of the imposed models of statehood, and the way that these models were established in the colonial transition.

²² “Solomon's keen for Australian intervention, says envoy”, *The Age*, 27 June 2003.

²³ Solomon Islands Development Services Exchange, “Solomon Islands NGO Response to the Australian led Intervention”, 24 July, 2003. (Statement developed at meeting in Honiara of eighteen NGO representatives from the provinces of Malaita, Makira, Guadalcanal and Western Province, 18-24 July, 2003.)

²⁴ Australian Strategic Policy Institute, *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of the Solomon Islands*, ASPI, Canberra, 2003.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ refer Donald Denoon, “Black Mischief – the problem with African analogies”, *Journal of Pacific History*, Vol.34, No.3, 1999 pp. 281-9 and Ben Reilly “The Africanisation of the South Pacific”, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, November 2000.

Part Three: RAMSI – making it work

The first stage of RAMSI has a strong focus on restoring law and order. There are clear early successes: guns are being handed in, stolen property returned, and key militant leaders including Jimmy Rasta and Harold Keke are responding to the weight of the intervention force. But as Foreign Minister Downer asks "...we could restore law and order, but what happens if, having restored law and order, we then leave? Will the situation just revert to what it was?"²⁷

Operation Helpem Fren is responding to problems with Solomon Islands' governance which results in massive insecurity, widespread economic hardship and civil disorder. What is now needed is dialogue about the way in which RAMSI will work in the long term to address the underlying causes of the problems confronting the Solomon Islands.

There are indeed systemic problems in Solomon Islands public service institutions. Government services of water, sanitation, education and health are chronically neglected. The proposed priority areas of RAMSI – support for the rule of law, budget stabilisation and economic reform – will address some of these issues. However, RAMSI must also implement a broader program of support which focuses on both the causes and the results of the current situation. The long-term RAMSI intervention must focus on addressing the causes of the crisis if it is to achieve sustainable improvements in the lives of Solomon Islanders.

In recognition of the important role that Solomon Islands' women have played in peace building, providing for their families, and responding to the needs arising from the conflict, the following strategies should be integrated into all aspects of RAMSI:

- Mainstream a gender perspective in all development initiatives, programs and projects. In order to do this, it is essential to ensure women's equal and effective participation in the development, planning and implementation of programs and projects.
- Emphasise the importance of consultation with women in communities. Community consultation should reflect the make-up of the community: men, women, youth, and different ethnic and social groups. Otherwise development initiatives will reinforce, rather than break down, inequalities within society and within communities.
- Take advantage of this window of opportunity to promote women's empowerment through all development initiatives. To be sustainable and address the needs of all members of the community, development initiatives must address women's concerns and transform existing gender inequalities.

This section of the report outlines a framework for the long-term RAMSI development intervention which will address the root causes of the crisis; and discusses strategies for RAMSI avoiding past mistakes that have created this situation.

The long-term RAMSI development intervention should be constructed around four programs, as follows:

1. Civil Society Engagement
2. Addressing the Causes of the Conflict
3. Community Peace Building
4. Operation Helpem Fren

²⁷ Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, Statement to Parliament on the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), 12 August 2003. <http://www.dfat.gov.au/media/transcripts/2003/030812_downer_in_pment.html>

Program Priority 1: Civil society engagement

In its draft Community Sector Strategy for the Solomon Islands, AusAID recognises that:

...providing assistance directly to what can loosely be defined as the 'community sector' (communities, CBOs and civil society groups) has emerged as an important priority of the aid program. International experience notes the importance of promoting the development of a robust and peaceful civil society to create demand for good governance. In Solomon Islands working directly with communities has proven essential to the promotion of peace and reconciliation processes and to ensure adequate levels of basic services to communities are maintained in the absence of state and provincial resources for service delivery.²⁸

To this end, in August 2003 AusAID released the *Australian Cooperation with Solomon Islands "Civil Society Strengthening and Community Engagement Program"*, a funding opportunity for Australian NGOs with a total program value of AU\$5 million over three years. While this program and the recognition of civil society's role in governance and in service delivery are very positive, there are broader opportunities for civil society engagement in RAMSI.

Recommendation – Civil society engagement

RAMSI should actively seek to work with civil society (community based, non-government, and church organisations) in all aspects of its programming. This should include needs identification, planning, implementation, and monitoring. Civil society engagement should be sought in relation to both the law and justice component and the long-term assistance package.

A first step for implementing this recommendation was identified by key NGO leaders at a meeting in Honiara in July 2003:

...we would like to see Solomon Island NGO representatives on the Intervention Taskforce, headed by Hon Paul Tovua, and on its Committees. Today the Taskforce is made up of politicians and government officials with no civil society representatives.²⁹

Support to civil society as an Instrument for good governance

Responsibilities for basic services in outlying provinces are often delegated to informal community-based and church-affiliated organisations such as village committees. Thus they have an important role to play in building unity within communities.

Civil society organisations, including senior church leaders, have openly challenged corruption in government, police and other institutions:

The government's involvement in corrupt economic practices - shady tax remissions, bogus recruitment of staff, selling off of valuable government assets, questionable property deals, corrupt tendering - is well known. Similarly, favouritism in providing funds for lost and damaged properties and various compensations will be quite clear if the government provides a complete public list of all its payouts.³⁰

Links with Indigenous Australia

The Senate Committee Inquiry report recommends that, within the context of *Operation Helpem Fren*, the Australian Government facilitates the involvement of key Australian Indigenous leaders and advocates in working with their Solomon Islands counterparts to promote and implement the proposed reforms. Oxfam Community Aid Abroad has recognised the potential value of linking Indigenous Australian and Pacific civil society leaders and has the first joint programming meeting between Indigenous Australia and Pacific Program Partners scheduled for October 2003.

²⁸ AusAID, Community Sector Strategy, draft, 2003.

²⁹ Solomon Islands Development Services Exchange, "Solomon Islands NGO Response to the Australian led Intervention", 24 July, 2003.

³⁰ Church of Melanesia Council of Bishops, "Statement on the present Government's criticism of the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA)", 25 May 2001.

Civil society leaders have demonstrated an ongoing commitment to good governance and emphasise their own role in achieving this:

We believe that strengthening democracy in our country and the reintroduction of law and order can only take place with the strengthening of civil society, NGOs and community organisations. Strengthening government without giving the same help to the community will not make lasting change. NGOs represent the local community and the hopes of our people and we have a direct channel to communities.³¹

Following the successful Solomon Islands NGO Leadership Training in July 2003, funded by AusAID, there is great potential for ongoing activities which could be supported with external financial, technical and political assistance.

Recommendations

Include long-term support for civil society initiatives, training and advocacy in RAMSI's long-term program. Support should focus on Provincial areas and include initiatives to strengthen NGO leadership.

RAMSI should work with the Government of the Solomon Islands to coordinate with decentralised local governance structures based on customary leadership, including informal community-based and church affiliated organisations, and village committees. These structures, underpinned by guaranteed human rights of expression and assembly, should be engaged to ensure demand for good governance principles of transparency, accountability, and adequate service provision.

Program Priority 2: Addressing the causes

Rural opportunities

Developing rural opportunities particularly for youth, is key to addressing the problems of rural dissatisfaction, rural-urban migration, and the erosion of traditional societies and law and justice mechanisms.

Community-based and church-affiliated organisations exercise a great deal of influence in the Solomon Islands, and are an important force to be harnessed in building peace and stability at a community level, particularly in rural areas.

Catholic Archbishop Adrian Smith argues that there are much more basic questions facing the country than disarming the militias, such as building a national identity. This is a fundamental step required to address the feelings of disillusion and isolation reported by rural youth:

The churches and civil society play a very important role in trying to help people to think 'country' - to think of being Solomon Islanders, to have national pride and to rise above what you could call the *wantok* system or just the tribal system, so that there is a sense of loyalty and a sense of acceptance of the Constitution of Solomon Islands. From this would come an acceptance of law and order.³²

Tackling the causes of internal migration

An Oxfam Community Aid Abroad partner organisation, Kastom Garden, comments that the current education system also works to alienate people from their traditional way of life but offers little or no alternative. Young people in particular look to migrate to urban centres in search of employment or even entertainment. The few opportunities leave them vulnerable to crime or joining militant groups.

Kastom Garden works with unemployed rural youth to bring them into productive, economic, land based activities. This enables youth to become involved in decentralised development programs, and creates a venue for youth previously involved in lawless activities to regain traditional values and culture.

³¹ Solomon Islands Development Services Exchange, "Solomon Islands NGO Response to the Australian led Intervention", 24 July, 2003.

³² "Catholic Archbishop speaks on Australian deployment", *Pacific Beat*, Radio Australia, 8 July 2003

Recommendations

RAMSI should identify and support programs which address the identified needs of rural youth, including the lack of rural employment, drug and alcohol use/abuse, sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS, unplanned pregnancies, family violence, polygamy, limited education opportunities, and loss of identity. Save the Children Australia's Youth Outreach Project and Kastom Garden's Youth Livelihoods Project provide useful lessons.

Land and culture

For Indigenous peoples in the Pacific, land is at the centre of life - as a source of livelihoods through subsistence activities; a source of power, authority and status through ownership; and above all as a source of security and identity. Around the region, there are significant variations in land tenure systems, but issues of land ownership and usage are at the heart of many conflicts which are presented as racial or ethnic clashes in the Pacific.³³

As Solomon Islanders' central resource, land will be a focus in Solomon Islands development. Some commentators are proposing new systems of land reform and a land registration system for Solomon Islands. But that process must be undertaken by Solomon Islanders, as Bishop Terry Brown has suggested:

The immediate answer is not, as some in the World Bank would have it, to encourage more and more alienation of land including land ownership by foreigners. Before there can be any more alienation of land, the customary land situation has to be sorted out – otherwise endless conflict will ensue.³⁴

In identifying rural opportunities there needs to be widespread debate about the social, economic, environmental and cultural impacts of large enclave developments, such as the Gold Ridge mine near Honiara.

Recommendations

RAMSI should explore options for formalising customary land ownership and registration which are mindful of:

- Pacific perceptions of land as a commodity that is held in trust for future generations, rather than as something that can be bought and sold;
- Matrilineal and patrilineal land ownership systems and the way in which land titling can affect gender relations and women's status;
- The needs of displaced people, who can be further marginalised by land registration.

RAMSI should create opportunities to link relevant government departments, civil society, and landowners in assessing appropriateness of resource developments. The criteria should include environmental and social impacts, benefit to communities and long-term sustainability.

RAMSI should provide support to community leaders and customary landowners to ensure their ability to negotiate effectively in dealings with resource developments.

³³ "Land, labour and independent development", Chapter 5 in *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995.

³⁴ Bishop Terry Brown, "Building a strategy for the Solomons", *Australian Financial Review* 18 July 2003.

Overcoming family and community origins of violence

Armed conflict is the manifestation of a culture of violence that must be broken down from within, and replaced with a culture of peace. To do this, it is necessary to break the cycle of violence and violent tendencies that may ultimately escalate into armed conflict.

It is important to recognise that a culture of violence commences within families and communities. In order to transform people's attitudes towards violence, community-based work is needed to advocate against all manifestations of violence, including gender violence. In order to build more peaceful and equitable communities, it is essential to eliminate gender violence and tolerance for violence against women and children.

Recommendations

RAMSI should provide support and financial assistance to organisations which undertake community-based work to eliminate gender violence, and for links and exchanges with Pacific organisations working in this area.

There must be no amnesty for sexual offences committed before, during or after the armed conflict.

An appropriate bureaucracy

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad welcomes the Australian Government's decision not to set up a parallel administration in the Solomon Islands as was suggested in the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. RAMSI should not under-emphasise the capacity of islanders to respond to crises, or ignore the contribution made by the policies of donor nations to the current situation. ASPI's assertion that "(i)n the Solomon Islands, the collapse of effective government means that there may be no point in trying to work with the national authorities"³⁵ is dangerous in that it denies the existence of dedicated and honest public servants and the contribution that they can make.

John Naitoro, the former Permanent Secretary to the Minister for Energy, Mines and Mineral Resources, has commented that the implication that "there is nobody in the Solomon Islands who is honest any more ...disempowers Solomon Islanders who have been working, trying to run the country in the last 25 years".³⁶

Moving away from the "failed state" discourse to a more proactive debate that seeks to identify appropriate models of governance that build on intrinsic Pacific processes of consensus, talking together, the power of the spoken word, personal pledges and commitment will be an important step. Building the capacity of committed civil servants and those in local governance structures to effectively engage in this debate will help avoid the pitfalls of imposed systems.

Recommendations

RAMSI should draw on the expertise of Solomon Islanders rather than create a parallel administration, increasing support for task forces led by three former Prime Ministers – Francis Billy Hilly, Bart Ulufa'alu, and Mannaseh Sogavare – on economic and financial restoration, law and order and security, and socio-economic and physical infrastructure rehabilitation.

RAMSI should support exposure and study visits to build local understanding of alternative mechanisms of governance – lessons from East Timor may be particularly useful.

Expatriate staffing of Solomon Island Government positions should draw on Pacific Islands technical experts, consultants, and volunteer development workers.

³⁵ Australian Strategic Policy Institute, "Beyond Bali" strategic assessment, ASPI, Canberra, 2002.

³⁶ "Academic queries long term effects of intervention", Pacific Beat, Radio Australia, 30 July 2003. Naitoro, currently a visiting fellow at the Australian National University, was centrally involved in the development of the Gold Ridge mining project on the island of Guadalcanal.

Effective education

Low levels of education services, with additional disruption caused by five years of conflict, are a major problem in the Solomon Islands today. Less than 40 per cent of children complete primary school, and functional adult literacy is as low as 22 per cent, with lesser rates for women. The economic crisis and diversion of revenues from core funding has meant that school teachers and nurses are only paid irregularly, and often no funding is available for basic materials like chalk, text books and desks.

The Church of Melanesia's Bishop of Malaita, Bishop Terry Brown, has suggested that donors should fund free education for primary and junior students until the economy revives "...otherwise the pool of illiterate, dissatisfied, disappointed youth will simply grow."

The importance of education

Johnson Fungals, Director of Education for the South Seas Evangelical Church which runs 11 schools (10 on Malaita & Guadalcanal) reminds us "we must not forget that the basis of a strong and healthy economy and society is the education of its people. I think schools are pivotal; schools are a very effective vehicle for propagating national unity and identity".

Johnson Fungals lists a priority for education support as "addressing the problem that teachers and staff within schools are facing, particularly non-payment of the schoolteachers".¹

Recommendations

RAMSI's long-term priority should include support to education services, particularly in rural areas.

Curriculum content and teaching methods should be reviewed to ensure the education system does not contribute to disenfranchising rural youth.

Opportunities for education and training to enhance the ability to secure rural livelihoods should be explored. NGOs working in this field should be involved in this process.

Support to health services

The Solomon Islands' health indicators identify inadequate health services: more than 20 per cent of children are malnourished; malaria is endemic with an annual incidence of 21 per cent; life expectancy is 65 years; infant mortality is 38 per 1,000 births; and 21 per cent of children under five years of age are underweight.³⁷

AusAID has already committed to supporting health system development in the Solomon Islands and recognises the role that non-government, particularly church organisations, play in service provision. Integration of HIV programming is required in specific relation to RAMSI.

Military forces have long been associated with increases in the commercial sex industry. Accordingly RAMSI must acknowledge its potential role in HIV transmission, both direct and indirect. In this context, the indications that RAMSI may become involved in improving infrastructure - particularly for transportation - and the likely increase in the amount of cash in the economy are both factors associated with the increased risk of HIV transmission. The Solomon Islands is currently a low HIV prevalence country, but the changing nature of Solomon Islands society is increasing the social vulnerability to HIV.

Recommendations

HIV awareness, prevention, advocacy and support mechanisms must be built into all RAMSI initiatives, beginning with the law and justice program.

³⁷ Asian Development Bank, *Country Assistance Plan (2000-2002) Solomon Islands*, ADB 1999.

Health support should include support for the national pharmacy to ensure supplies and distribution of essential drugs, health worker salaries, obstetric and emergency services, reproductive and family health, and support for local health outreach services.

Program Priority 3: Community peace building

Analysis of conflict resolution and peace building in the Pacific region identifies the importance of:

- Operating at a range of levels, from community to national, and from regional to international.
- Engaging a range of players in the peace process, including the full range of civil society, customary and church leaders; not just government officials, soldiers and leaders of armed militias or rebel groups.
- The key role of women's organisations, customary authorities and church leaders in providing a catalyst for community consultation, disarmament and reconciliation initiatives.
- Allowing sufficient time for people to meet, consult and decide at their own pace

The importance of custom and ceremony in conflict resolution is a crucial part of Solomon Islands' society. However, in the last few years, the practice of *kastom* reconciliation and compensation has been distorted and deliberately abused. The government has emphasised monetary compensation and made significant payments to ex-combatants, which have exaggerated tension and corruption rather than resolving it.³⁸

With the involvement of customary and community leaders, genuine *kastom* reconciliation methods and practices must be promoted. The intervention forces must draw upon the knowledge and resources of customary elders and community leaders, including female leaders. In this way, customary values and traditions can be used to promote restorative justice in a manner that is meaningful to communities. Achieving reconciliation at all levels will be a long process, and requires a long-term commitment from RAMSI, beyond the establishment of law and order.

Recommendation – peace building

Community based peace building initiatives must be integrated into all efforts to build lasting peace in the Solomon Islands. The active participation of women's groups and female community leaders; wide-ranging consultation with civil society, including customary and church leaders; and the engagement of youth in the peace process must be facilitated.

Women's peace building initiatives

Following recent regional conflicts, a notable feature of efforts for peace building, reconciliation and reconstruction has been women's initiatives, which have confronted the masculine culture of violence and asserted the central role of women in building peace within communities. In June 1999, women in the Solomon Islands initiated a Reconciliation and Peace Committee, and peace building work continued through bodies such as the Federation of Women, the Family Support Centre and Women for Peace.³⁹

In their capacity as affected community members, mothers, sisters and wives, women in the Solomon Islands have personally challenged armed soldiers and militia gunmen to halt their attacks on non-combatants. Leading women's activist Afu Billy has noted the critical role played by women in

³⁸ See Solomon Islands Christian Association, *Truth & Reconciliation Commission: A Framework for Public Consultation*, Honiara, 2002.

³⁹ Alice Pollard, "Resolving conflict in Solomon Islands – the Women for Peace approach" and Daley Tovosia Paina, "Peacemaking in the Solomon Islands – the experience of the Guadalcanal Women for Peace movement" in Pamela Thomas (ed.), *Development Bulletin*, op cit.

resolving the armed conflict, and emphasised the necessity of incorporating a gender perspective in the peace process:

If it wasn't for the women of Solomon Islands the armed conflict wouldn't have ended. They went beyond their own safety and security to go out there to the camps to talk to their warring boys to stop fighting.

I think this is where a lot of our male decision makers and policy makers do not see that the way women resolve conflict is quite different to the way men resolve conflict. Men would go through the structures – they would go through structures and round table meetings – while women deal more with conflict through relationships. They looked at the boys out there as their sons, as their nephews, as husbands, and they go there with a message of love and not a message of hate. We saw from the Solomons' experience that the boys themselves didn't feel threatened because as women what more harm could we do to them – we used our tears to get them back.

The sad thing about it was that when the armed conflict stopped [in 2000], the women were excluded again from any of the discussions. For any peace process to start and to go well, men need to start recognising women and how women address things ...I know that in our culture, mothers are very much respected by their sons.⁴⁰

Recommendations

RAMSI should work to ensure that women and women's organisations are actively involved in official talks and peace processes.

RAMSI should actively involve women in policy making and designing long-term programming through specific consultations, joint field missions, negotiations, and drawing on lessons learned.

RAMSI should draw on the experience and expertise of Solomon Islands' women and women focused organisations in conflict resolution, for example SICA, Women's Federation, Family Support Centre, Vois Blong Meri, National Council of Women and others.

Restorative justice

Restorative justice is a community-based model of conflict resolution that provides an alternative to the formal criminal justice system. The process of restorative justice brings together perpetrators of crimes and affected parties; and by emphasising community-based justice, reconciles the parties and enables the reintegration of offenders into communities.

There are potential sources of tension between "Western" criminal justice systems, which emphasise penal measures, and customary systems of justice, which emphasise reconciliation between parties, often using compensation and symbolic measures. In order to build lasting peace, both reconciliation and justice are required.

Recognising that reconciliation is a central element of long-term conflict resolution, peace activists are drawing on a synergistic mixture of Christian and Melanesian values to promote restorative justice.⁴¹ Women's organisations and church groups in the Pacific have

Reconciliation

The Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) Peace Office has been a focal point for reconciliation and reconstruction efforts, and established a working committee to formulate a process to facilitate healing and reconciliation at various levels, and rebuild national unity.

To achieve this goal, the working committee proposed the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission with three components – truth telling; a justice or amnesty process; and reconciliation – and a broad mandate to investigate the events of the ethnic conflict.¹

The reconciliation process incorporates custom law, custom law chiefs and churches; and promotes restorative justice. By promoting reconciliation and national unity, the truth and reconciliation process will assist the re-integration of perpetrators into their former communities.

⁴⁰ "Women's voice ignored in intervention debate", *Pacific Beat*, Radio Australia, 21 July 2003. Afu Billy is currently working with the UNDP-funded Regional Rights Resource Team in Fiji.

⁴¹ Pat Howley, *Breaking spears and mending hearts – peacemakers and restorative justice in Bougainville*, Federation Press, Leichhardt, 2002.

expressed concern that formal peace negotiations and cease-fires centre on the armed parties, without acknowledging the concerns of civil society and the need for restorative justice.⁴² This is a more sustainable approach to building peace, as it engages the people directly affected by the conflict, and promotes reconciliation between them.

Recommendations

RAMSI should extend work with Solomon Islands Government in the field of restorative justice, including alternative sentencing, and explore opportunities for integrating customary systems and institutions of justice with Western judicial structures. Experiences from Bougainville, East Timor, and other Pacific countries may be useful.

The Australian Government should provide financial and technical support for training in reconciliation, protection from violence, trauma counselling and appropriate indigenous counselling methods.

The Australian Government should fund exchanges and information sharing between Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in other countries, human rights organisations and relevant government departments and community organisations in the Solomon Islands.

Program Priority 4: *Operation Helpem Fren*

In the wake of September 11th there have been increasingly explicit linkages between military, political and humanitarian agendas. Beyond the situation of internally displaced people from the Weather Coast, there is no immediate humanitarian emergency in the Solomon Islands. Problems of law and order problems are endemic, rather than overt; much of the violence is labelled as “personal” or occurs behind closed doors. This creates a new situation for military intervention. *Operation Helpem Fren* could potentially become a catalyst for escalated violence, or for additional social problems, and must at all times act in a way that is mindful of this. Cultural and gender sensitivity are fundamental principles to adhere to.

Recommendation – *Operation Helpem Fren*

The police and military deployment must be mindful of its potential impacts on Solomon Islands’ society. RAMSI must insist on cultural and gender sensitivity, allow time and resources for adequate information flows to the people of the Solomon Islands, and model appropriate conduct at all times.

Access to information

There is little detailed knowledge of the intervention in many areas of the Solomon Islands, especially in rural areas and outlying islands. In spite of the efforts of the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation and international broadcasters like Radio Australia, many people outside government circles in Honiara have noted a lack of timely and accurate information about the format, duration and mandate of the international intervention force.

In the lead-up to the deployment of international police and military forces, one NGO leader noted:

(It’s) a big and frightening experience because people do not know what the 2,000 people are going to do and if they come in uniform, like people in the villages fear the police. What about these people arriving in uniform and what are they going to do? So there’s a need for explanation to the people that these people are coming to help...until you have public face-to-face contact and people are informed in that manner, you’re not going to expect the majority of people to know what’s going on.⁴³

⁴² Civil society perspectives on peacemaking were outlined at an important seminar in October 2000 - see Pamela Thomas (ed.), “Conflict and peacemaking in the Pacific – social and gender perspectives”, *Development Bulletin*, No.53, October 2000.

⁴³ “Misinformation instils fear in locals” *Pacific Beat*, Radio Australia, 1 July 2003.

Relying on radio and print media is an inadequate information strategy. The 1999 census found that only 41 per cent of the population have access to a working radio, and literacy in the population of 15 years of age and over is 76 per cent (83 per cent for males and 68 per cent for women).⁴⁴ Functional literacy is estimated to be much lower by some NGOs. Face-to-face meetings at all levels are required; civil society organisations with strong outreach networks are in the best position to do this.

Recommendations

Australian and Solomon Islands authorities should increase publicity and outreach to inform the wider public about the timing and format of the international deployment and subsequent development policies and programs. Face-to-face community meetings could be facilitated by local civil society organisations.

RAMSI should increase the amount of Pidgin training for all overseas forces deployed in the Solomon Islands.

The Australian Government should increase funding and training for information services such as the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation, staff of daily newspapers and Honiara-based internet services such as the People First Network (<http://www.peoplefirst.net.sb>).

Appropriate conduct

The deployment in the Solomon Islands follows a number of peacekeeping operations in recent years involving Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Island forces. These include the South Pacific Peacekeeping Force in Bougainville (1994); the Truce Monitoring Group and Peace Monitoring Group in Bougainville (from 1997); INTERFET and UNTAET in Timor Lorosa'e (from 1999); and International Peace Monitoring Team in the Solomon Islands (from 2000). Many commentators have noticed the important cultural role played by Pacific Islanders from Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga in joint peacekeeping operations, in contrast to the perceived "rowdy" style of the Australians.⁴⁵ The Bougainville operation involved multi-national civilian as well as military peace monitors.

There are important standards for the conduct of ADF, AFP and other personnel deployed in the Solomon Islands. Given the disparities of wealth, and potential for sexual violence, prostitution and harassment of women by international peacekeeping forces, it is important for senior officers to monitor the interaction of the largely male intervention force, and insist on exemplary conduct. It is crucial that the military adhere to their agreed code of conduct and respect the local population, and that any impropriety be reported and acted upon.

Recommendations

Senior *Operation Helpem Fren* officers should monitor and prohibit acts of sexual violence, prostitution and harassment of women by international peacekeeping forces. A reporting mechanism for inappropriate behaviour, or general community concerns, should be established. In Bougainville regular meetings with NGOs and community groups facilitated a two-way reporting process.

Should there be reports of gender-based violence or any sexual inappropriateness which are contestable, the presence of an ombudsman should be considered.

Organisations such as the Pacific Women's Network Against Violence Against Women and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre can be brought in to provide training to police and military personnel both in terms of their conduct, and in terms of programming opportunities that bring in women's important role in peace keeping.

⁴⁴ Solomon Islands Census Office, *Solomon Islands 1999 Population and Housing Census Main Results, Report to the Government of the Solomon Islands*, Government of Solomon Islands, 1999.

No amnesty for past crimes

After the violent clashes in 1998-2000, there was a major peace building dialogue on *HMNZS Te Kaha* for Solomon Islands NGOs and churches. The *Te Kaha* forum recommended a qualified amnesty, involving truth and reconciliation processes and no amnesty for sexual violence. However, the subsequent 2000 Townsville Agreement, funded by Australia and signed by government and militia representatives without civil society involvement, saw a much broader amnesty proposal and a failure to address underlying causes.

The issue of amnesty has arisen again in *Operation Helpem Fren*. A 21-day gun amnesty was announced on 31 July 2003, to encourage militia leaders and criminal gangs to return high-powered weapons. Beyond this however, it is unclear whether there will be a general amnesty for crimes committed over the last five years.

A number of Solomon Islanders, including some who have fled overseas from conflict since 1998, are fearful that the gun amnesty may be extended into a more general amnesty. Such fears have been exacerbated by statements by Prime Minister Sir Allen Kemakeza, who has suggested consideration is being given to a new round of amnesties and the possible issuing of "certificates of amnesty." He also suggested that Australian, New Zealand and other regional police can "only deal with new crimes, not old crimes."⁴⁶

As a letter from exiled Solomon Islanders in Australia notes:

(Amnesty) will inadvertently serve to protect the interests of established criminal elements in and outside the government. Under these conditions the loss of faith in public institutions will continue to plunge and the credibility of an Australian led police force will be severely undermined in the eyes of the public and international community...As a community there is an expectation the coalition partners of Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Papua New Guinea will examine this issue very seriously and respect the opinions expressed by the SI community.⁴⁷

Bishop Terry Brown has stated:

The Townsville agreement provided no amnesty for any criminal activity committed after the agreement's signing. Since then there have been several serious killings in which it is suspected that ex-militants and / or the police are involved, not to mention assaults, robberies and other crimes...It is hoped that the police component of the intervention will help in these investigations and prosecute, even if those charged are police or politicians.⁴⁸

For the international policing assistance to take root, corrupt senior officials must be prosecuted. It should not be limited to the disarming of grassroots militia members. There is an expectation of justice as well as peace, but some members of the current government are very compromised due to their association with militants.

Recommendation

A general amnesty should not be granted for crimes between 1998 - 2003, and this should be clearly articulated. Those individuals and groups suspected of criminal activity should be investigated and prosecuted under the law. There should be no amnesty for crimes of murder, rape or sexual violence.

⁴⁵ Monica Wehner and Donald Denoon (eds.), *Without a gun*, op.cit.

⁴⁶ Craig Skehan & Tony Allard, "Solomons PM sets rules; ignore old crimes", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28-29 June 2003.

⁴⁷ Letter from Solomon Islands citizens, 1 July 2003 (no names are appended "for the safety and consideration of family still living in the Solomon Islands").

⁴⁸ Bishop Terry Brown, "Building a strategy for the Solomons", *Australian Financial Review* 18 July 2003.

Civil military cooperation

□ Community liaison

Australia and New Zealand are both in the final stages of drafting Civil Military Cooperation (CIMIC) doctrines which should provide the required guidelines and monitoring standards for civil-military relationships. The Solomon Islands intervention presents as an opportunity for *Operation Helpem Fren* forces to demonstrate best practice in CIMIC relationships to the wider international arena. A dedicated CIMIC office should operate in the Solomons with male and female staff. This would encourage open channels of communication and be non-threatening and accessible, particularly to local women should sensitive issues of sexual conduct or gender based violence arise.

In order to enhance civil-military relationships, it is important for independent observers to monitor what is happening with the military forces and their impact on the general population, as well as to monitor any positive social change. *Operation Helpem Fren* should liaise regularly with relevant church, community and women's organisations, and avoid relying solely on government views.

□ Military – humanitarian delineation

In the last decade, military interventions have increasingly engaged with humanitarian actors. In some cases this has been problematic with what is perceived as the invasion of the military into the "humanitarian space". When troops dress as civilians and operate like aid workers – as in Afghanistan – civilians have difficulty distinguishing between military forces and civilian humanitarian agencies. This makes it difficult for humanitarian agencies to maintain important perceptions of independence, and it potentially threatens the security of aid workers and their effectiveness in negotiating access to all those in need, particularly when involved in conflict situations.

It is vital that the distinction between military and non-military actors is reinforced in the Solomon Islands. Although direct conflict is not envisaged, should it eventuate, then the different roles and mandates of the military and civilian actors must be understood by the local population in order to ensure the security and safety of humanitarian workers in the longer term.

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad welcomes the importance placed on meeting humanitarian need. But our experience shows that civilians are best assisted when civilian humanitarian agencies provide this assistance. In contrast, military rules of engagement are set by political and strategic goals, rather than an impartial assessment of humanitarian need. Designed to have quick impact, and to convert hearts and minds to the political cause, military-delivered aid is frequently more costly and fails to take into account communities' long-term needs.

Recommendations

A dedicated CIMIC office with a gender-balanced staff should operate in the Solomon Islands to enhance the relationship between the civilian, NGO and military sectors.

Protecting civilians is a priority and must fall within the international humanitarian law and human rights conventions. This is particularly emphasised if armed conflict should occur.

Military should appear in uniform at all times to avoid problematic issues of civilian perception which may lead to security issues for NGOs. Any delivery of humanitarian relief should be through those organisations mandated to do so.

RAMSI forces must respect the impartial and independent nature of humanitarian agencies working within the region.

Operation Helpem Fren should draw on the expertise and cultural knowledge of Pacific island women's and humanitarian organisations for training of personnel on deployment to the Solomon Islands, including training of police, judiciary and military personnel with information on sexual violence, rape, HIV / AIDS and human rights law.

RAMSI should encourage ratification of International Humanitarian Law Conventions by Pacific governments with personnel deployed to the Solomon Islands (especially Protocol 2 of the Geneva Conventions on civil disturbances).