



RAMSI on the ground



Platypus Editor and AFP photographer Brian Hartigan spent a month in the Solomon Islands with the first RAMSI deployment. Here is an excerpt from his account of those first few weeks.

The RAMSI mission hit the ground running and, if the success of the first weeks in the troubled country is any gauge, the future looks bright for the people of the Solomon Islands.

It is the people of the Solomon Islands that the mission has come to serve and it is these people who have overwhelmingly welcomed members into their lives and their country.

Never before has such a mission been conceived and rarely has a foreign intervention in any nation met with 97 per cent popular support across the country, according to a poll conducted by a non-government organisation.

This is not the first mission to the Solomon Islands but it is the first to have such far-reaching powers and such far-reaching popular and international support.

Led by the AFP's Ben McDevitt, the Participating Police Force (PPF) component of RAMSI sees itself working in close cooperation with Royal Solomon Islands Police at all levels – with Commander McDevitt sworn in as Deputy Commissioner of the RSIP.

Starting their new jobs almost immediately after landing at Henderson International Airport, the first joint AFP RSIP foot patrols through the streets of Honiara were launched a few hours later.

Less than 24 hours after his arrival, Deputy Commissioner McDevitt was handed 25 illegal weapons collected by the National Peace Council over the previous two days, while local newspaper reports told of vehicles and other property suddenly appearing in driveways.

Concentrating on the removal of all guns from Solomon society was the first priority of the of the intervention force.

Deputy Commissioner McDevitt said the message on this point was clear - the people of the Solomon Islands did not need firearms.

“Now is the time to totally rid this community of firearms,” he said.

“There’s no doubt at all that the overwhelming majority of the people of the Solomon Islands want this to occur.

“There may be variation in the motivation of certain individuals, but I’d say that there will be real pressure from the people, collectively, on those individuals holding firearms to hand them in.

“The time for negotiations and deals has come and gone. Every single gun in this country must be surrendered. To anyone thinking of retaining or hiding firearms I would say, we have the resources, we have the capability and we certainly have the commitment to track those weapons down and we will do so very effectively.”

The Solomon Star, the national daily paper, is filled with articles, editorials and letters to the editor that give encouragement to thoughts of a turning tide in public empowerment.

Speaking to a large crowd at a military and police open day at Town Ground sports field, Deputy Commissioner McDevitt said he was encouraged by quite a few indicators that community pride was slowly coming back.

“Footpaths and centre strips on the road are being cleaned and mown and I noticed rubbish trucks are active, clearing rubbish from the streets,” he said. The betel nut sellers have moved out of the city and into their allocated areas.

“These are all excellent signs that, while there is a long way to go, the community is prepared to get in and lend their support.”

The open day at Town Ground, on a sweltering Sunday afternoon, came as a surprise to one small group of people, despite it being widely advertised.

A local scout group, intent on a sports afternoon and fundraising barbecue, were suddenly surrounded by military trucks, trailers, tents, cam nets and assorted military hardware, and their sports field descended upon by two military helicopters.

Undaunted, and sniffing an opportunity, scouts were dispatched for a lot more snags to throw on the barbie.

The crowd, estimated at more than 15,000, turned out not only to catch a glimpse of something new and exciting in their town, but above all they wanted to show their support for the force from overseas who had come to help.

Soldiers, sailors and policemen alike had hands shaken and ears bent all day by heartfelt words of encouragement and thanks.

Walking through the streets of Honiara or riding in a taxi, one is constantly reminded of the warmth of this widespread welcome.

“Please tell your family and your friends in Australia that we are very, very happy that you have come to our country,” taxi driver Joseph told me.

“It has been very hard for us for many years. We have been afraid. Our economy has been hurt. But now that you are here we feel safe and we know that our country will get better.”

