



Police and military from the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands arrive on 24 July 2003.

Into paradise lost

Deployment of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands on 24 July 2003 marked the beginning of an odyssey that continues to this day.

When the first Hercules C-130 aircraft lowered its ramp in the muted dawn light of 24 July 2003 in Solomon Islands, soldiers advanced with weapons drawn and fanned out from the aircraft in military formation.

“The reality was that we didn’t know until we got there on 24 July exactly how we would be received,” says the first Commander of the Participating Police Force (PPF), Ben McDevitt. To the then Assistant Commissioner McDevitt, it was a real concern. Now Queensland State Manager of the Australian Crime Commission, he says he thought that at some stage there could be casualties.

It was relief then, that greeting the first waves of police, soldiers and civilian staff of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), were “thousands of cheering, waving” people. “So the armed military quickly holstered weapons and waved back,” Mr McDevitt says.

This reception from the citizens of Solomon Islands was repeated everywhere RAMSI members went and continued as the mission established itself. Mr McDevitt says “there was a tremendous air of expectation” to finally end five years of tensions and the gradual breakdown of their society.

“Prior to RAMSI,” he says “the country was in a state of decline that met all the indicators of a failing state. Corruption was rampant and Honiara was under the sway of armed criminal elements.

“There was a form of civil war raging on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal that had followed years of very bitter ethnic tension in particular between the inhabitants of Guadalcanal and Malaita. In the remote areas, self-proclaimed warlords and thugs with guns created no-go zones where they committed horrific crimes at will.”

Historical context

The sprawling Solomon Islands is an archipelago of almost 1000 individual islands and a combined land mass of 28,896 square kilometres. The country lies across 725,197 square kilometres in the south-west Pacific Ocean. Its nine provinces are mainly on the largest islands where more than 80 local languages are spoken. The capital, Honiara, is situated on



Assistant Commissioner Ben McDevitt meets the press in Honiara two days after the arrival in Solomon Islands.



AFP members of the Participating Police Force are greeted by the local people.



The Participating Police Force were welcomed throughout Solomon Islands.



Royal Solomon Islands Police Force Acting Commissioner Juanita Matanga says the situation in 2003 "is hard to explain".

Guadalcanal – the site of some of the fiercest battles of World War II against the Japanese.

Just south of the equator, the country is typically tropical. In 2003, up to 90 per cent of the population was engaged in a subsistence lifestyle. Primary industry such as timber and fishing to palm oil and cocoa underpins the country’s export economy. Land, therefore, is a fundamental component of wealth.

Land disputes would underpin the conflicts that became known as ‘the tensions’ of the late 1990s until the deployment of RAMSI in 2003. Many of these disputes predated Solomon Islands’ independence on 7 July 1978 to its colonial times as a British protectorate. A recent study reveals that 61 per cent of Solomon Islands’ people still say the most common cause of conflict is land.

Mr McDevitt says unemployment, urban drift to Honiara and deterioration of the economy would bring ethnic divisions to crisis point throughout the 1990s. Friction between the inhabitants of Guadalcanal and Malaita over issues such as land,

internal migration and compensation claims led to numerous outbreaks of violence and criminality.

“At the height of this conflict some 20,000 Malaitans were forced, through fear and intimidation, to flee their homes in Guadalcanal and return to Malaita. Young dispossessed and aggrieved youths took up arms and clashes between rival groups became commonplace,” he said.

As the ethnic, social and political situation worsened, militias assumed control of Honiara unopposed. When the police opened its armories to the militia the situation was lost. The government and its institutions had ceased to function effectively. Corruption was widespread. Public finances were in ruin and many of the most basic services such as health and education



“We didn’t know what to do.”



were not being delivered to the people. Solomon Islands was on the brink of collapse.

“It is hard to explain,” says the current Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) Acting Commissioner Juanita Matanga. In 2003, Commissioner Matanga was the acting Director of Logistics. Clearly determined, intelligent and passionate, she reflects intensely on those times.

“It’s hard to explain because you couldn’t speak freely. You see your colleagues are not taking up their oath as [they were] supposed to do. At the same time you see how people were victims of many criminal activities. The police force was not able to give that security as it was mandated under the constitution.

“We didn’t know what to do. We had no other plan. We ... hoped that one day things would go back to normal and it happened on that day [when RAMSI arrived].”

RAMSI is formed

In desperation, Solomon Islands’ then Prime Minister Sir Allan Kemakeza made an urgent request for assistance to Australia in April 2003. RAMSI, in response, was born. Unlike the United Nations Mission in Timor Leste, RAMSI was raised under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and its 15 member countries would contribute. On 22 July 2003, the Solomon Islands National Parliament unanimously passed the Facilitation of International Assistance Act

Participating Police Force members discuss the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands weapon amnesty.





The joy of Solomon Islands' children was a gauge of mission success.

2003, which provides authority under Solomon Islands domestic law for RAMSI activities.

From April through to 24 July, a frenetic 10-week planning period began to deploy an international mission of 2,200 police, military and civilian staff. Mr McDevitt was appointed as the police-led mission's first commander of the PPF. Diplomat Nick Warner was appointed as head of the RAMSI mission and the then Lieutenant Colonel John Frewen would lead the military's Combined Task Force 635.

"We had a very interesting series of meetings," Mr McDevitt recalls with some humour. He says the Australian Government wanted a single concept of operation, "with good reason" he adds. "At one meeting we talked about how long we would be in Solomon Islands."

McDevitt explains that the military representative said securing the strategic military points would take 32 days, and then the military would be ready to withdraw. Mr McDevitt then explained that the community had lost trust in the then RSIP and the police component of the mission could take up to 10 years.

He says a representative from another agency then talked at length about endemic corruption in the country. Further, there was a need for significant programs in infrastructure, finance and all other departments. The assessment was that it would take a generation to make the necessary changes.

"So we've got a matter of weeks to put up a plan to cabinet for approval. We are talking about expenditure in the order of \$300 million initially and we have that sort of variance in that we are going to be there for days or years or for decades."

"... but when the kids stop waving at our vehicles then we are going to be in trouble."

A plan

But a plan did emerge. The concept of operations involved three phases – commencement, consolidation and sustainability/self-reliance.

Commencement. The commencement phase addressed the immediate tactical and operational issues in the initial six months. It was about establishing RAMSI in the country and winning back the streets of Honiara from criminals.

Consolidation. The second phase would deal with longer-term considerations such as re-establishing rule-of-law within the county and getting nation-building programs on track. Here, the multi-agency nature of the RAMSI mission was essential. However, other programs could not progress without rule-of-law.

Sustainability/self-reliance. The final phase would be the transition of law and order back to the now RSIPF. That phase is essentially still underway.

Success

The RAMSI mission is unquestionably a success. The United Nations itself has recognised the achievement of this unique police-led mission. The first 12 months of the mission arguably saved a country from collapse. Mr McDevitt says the success was no accident. He cites three underlying principles of the RAMSI mission that were integral to its success.

The first of these was that RAMSI followed a request for assistance by Solomon Islands. Moreover, it was wholeheartedly supported by the majority of law abiding citizens. Secondly, RAMSI had a strong mandate. The passage of legislation through Solomon Islands' parliament legally empowered RAMSI to immediately restore law and order.

Finally, Mr McDevitt says the multi-national and multi-disciplinary flavour of the mission was critical. He says the force was not only empowered with delivering law and order but delivering peace dividends as well.

"The first part was putting boots on the ground and restoring security and law and order – we are very



Partnership forges strong bonds

One of the fundamental successes of the Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands (RAMSI) is the strength of the partnership within member nations of the Pacific Islands Forum and their commitment to Solomon Islands.

During good times and challenges, the RAMSI multi-national partnership and the multi-agency nature of the mission has been a bedrock of its success.

The first commander of the Participating Police Force, then Assistant Commissioner Ben McDevitt, says the strength of the RAMSI mandate is fundamental to the mission's success.

Ultimately, ongoing support for the RAMSI partners and partnership from everyday Solomon Islanders and their elected representatives has seen the mission weather any challenges.

good at that. It's tried and true and in some ways that is the easier part ... what then?"

As the weeks and months of the mission rolled on the appreciative people of the Solomon Islands kept waving. Successive police commanders have stressed the importance of this relationship if this mission is to be successful. This wasn't lost on Mr McDevitt either.

"The children would always wave at a RAMSI vehicle with smiles on their faces. I remember saying in those months that it mightn't be a way of measuring technical support – but when the kids stop waving at our vehicles then we are going to be in trouble as a mission and it is something we would need to monitor very carefully.

"I think if there is one lesson that anybody could take out of Solomon Islands and RAMSI, I think it is the importance of relationships."

The 2011 People's Survey of Solomon Islands conducted by the Australian National University estimated that 86 per cent of the people of Solomon Islands still supported the RAMSI mission.

Pacific Island Forum member nations

Australia	Palau
Cook Islands	Papua New Guinea
Federated States of Micronesia	Republic of Marshall Islands
Fiji	Samoa
Kiribati	Solomon Islands
Nauru	Tonga
New Zealand	Tuvalu
Niue	Vanuatu



Australian Participating Police Force members take in their surroundings.