



# Uniya

JESUIT SOCIAL JUSTICE CENTRE

VIEW ON THE PACIFIC briefing series



## THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

### Solomon Islands

**Capital:** Honiara

**Head of government:** Prime Minister Sir Allan Kemakeza

**Border countries:** Papua

New Guinea,  
Vanuatu, Australia

In the last six years, conflict between militant groups from the two major islands – Guadalcanal and Malaita – brought the Solomon Islands to the brink of collapse. Atrocities were committed on both sides with some of the worst occurring on the Weathercoast where the rebel, Harold Ke'ke operated. The arrival of RAMSI (the Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands) in July 2003 effectively brought an end to that violence and over the last year helped to re-develop the police and justice systems. However much remains to be done. Patterns of corruption in the country's leadership, lack of resources for rural areas, entrenched land grievances, and few opportunities for young people are some of the issues now to

be addressed. These next steps are perhaps the most necessary to change the systems sourcing the violence.

The Solomon Islands is an archipelago of mountainous islands and low-lying coral isles in the South Pacific Ocean, east of Papua New Guinea, and north of Vanuatu. It is closer to the Australian mainland than New Zealand. The six largest islands are



Guadalcanal, Malaita, Choiseul, New Georgia, Santa Isabel, and Makira.

It has a young and growing population of 500,000 people. The median age is about 18 years and the population growth rate is about 2.8%. While Honiara has about 50,000 people, most towns and villages are small in size. Ethnically over 90% of the people are Melanesian. Melanesian Pijin is the *lingua franca* in much of the country although there are some 80 different language groups and these have dialects as well. 95% of the people are Christian with the principal religions being the Church of Melanesia (Anglican) about 35%; Roman Catholic 20%; South Seas Evangelical Church 15%; with the United Church (Methodist) and Seventh-day-Adventist having about 10% each.

Communal, familial and clan ties remain strong in Solomon Islands. Most islanders see themselves first as members of a clan, next as inhabitants of their natal island, and only third as citizens of their nation. Many consider themselves to be part of an immediate family of about 200 and some can trace back their ancestors at least ten generations. The Pijin word “wantok” (one talk) refers to people from the same language group and is used to indicate blood relatives in the extended family.

Around 75% of the population engage in subsistence farming and fishing and have little involvement in the formal or cash economy. The GDP is about \$700 per annum, similar to East Timor. The export industry is small and includes fish, mining, and timber. Mineral resources are undeveloped. Natural resources include fish, timber, gold, bauxite, phosphates, lead, zinc, and nickel. Agricultural products include cocoa beans, coconuts, palm kernels, rice, potatoes, vegetables, fruit, cattle, pigs, as well as timber and fish. There has been much deforestation and soil erosion and many of the surrounding coral reefs are dead or dying. The Solomon Islands relies heavily on aid from Australia.

Most manufactured goods and petroleum products must be imported. The main imports are foodstuffs, consumer goods, machinery and transport materials.

Self-government was achieved in 1976 and independence announced on 7 July, 1978. There is a capital territory, Honiara, and 9 provinces are administered locally by elected Provincial Assemblies. The National Parliament has 50 seats with members elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms. The Prime Minister, elected by a majority vote of Parliament, selects his own Cabinet that exercises executive authority. The Governor General, Ini Lapli, represents the British monarch as the local Head of State. Over the years some in political office have been criticized for malfeasance and nepotism. Indeed the Solomon Island Government has faced persistent allegations of corruption and incompetence.

### Events since 1998

Ethnic violence, government corruption, and widespread crime have undermined civil stability. In the late 1990's, tension between the Guadalcanalese and the Malaitans escalated on the main island of Guadalcanal. This arose mainly from unresolved land and social disputes between local villagers and settlers who had arrived mostly from Malaita Island since World War 2. Armed groups of Guadalcanal people, many who were unemployed youths, drove out of the rural areas people from other islands. These militants were known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM). Thousands of Malaitan families were forced to abandon their homes and villages and flee to Honiara.

In January 2000, Malaitan militants formed the Malaitan Eagles Force (MEF) and retaliated against the IFM. Large quantities of weapons were transferred from the police (the majority of whom are Malaitans) to the MEF. Many police assisted the MEF, and

some were involved in unwarranted use of lethal force against civilians when pursuing the Guadalcanalese militants. In June 2000 the MEF seized control of the capital, forced Prime Minister Ulufa'ulu to resign and parliament to form a new government with Sogavare as the interim Prime Minister. MEF fighters also linked with the Bougainville secessionist movement and seized some western towns. A new Parliament was elected in December 2001 and Sir Allan Kemakeza appointed Prime Minister.

The armed conflict between Malaitan and Guadalcanalese militants led to a serious deterioration in security. Violence and crime increased. Successive governments had limited success in their efforts to restore peace. The political institutions were weak, political leaders felt obligations to the conflicting parties, and some Members of Parliament took sides. The police were implicated in the violence and exploitation. The judiciary was hampered by threats against judges and prosecutors. The police and judicial systems were ineffective in investigating human rights abuses, and the lack of Government insistence to examine crimes contributed to a climate of impunity.

Efforts occurred to resolve the conflict and in November 2000 many committed themselves to the terms of the Townsville Peace Agreement. It was significant at the time and delayed further Australian assistance. However by 2002, despite the efforts of an international observer team that arrived following the Townsville Peace Agreement, the security situation had worsened. Militants from both sides committed human rights abuses including murder, kidnap, rape and sexual assault, forced displacement, looting, and arson. Tens of thousands were cut off from basic food supplies, medical and other relief. Many were tortured and killed by the militants. People lived in fear of looting or 'payback' cruelty by militia groups or criminal elements.

Where the Government failed, many in the church responded. They provided humanitarian support getting medicines and vital supplies to displaced people. They ferried the wounded and essential supplies through check points. They were involved in peace and reconciliation initiatives. They listened to the stories of persecution and slaughter and investigated the reports of people killed. They negotiated for the release of hostages and were involved in the collection of weapons. Some, such as the Anglican Melanesian Brotherhood, paid the price of having their own members murdered, kidnapped and tortured. They were seen as people of integrity and impartiality, who practiced the ministry of reconciliation. Seven members of the Melanesian Brotherhood were abducted and killed by Ke'ke's followers in March and April 2003.

With the breakdown of law and order, the formal sector of the economy was on the brink of collapse. The Government was insolvent and most commercial export activities ceased to operate. Hospitals and schools ceased to function for a lack of funds. Public servants were not paid and many did not turn up to work. Roads fell into disrepair especially during the wet season. Ke'ke and his supporters continued their destructive campaign in the Weathercoast, committing acts of murder, rape, abduction and looting. A Joint Operations group set out to curb Ke'ke's influence, was also ruthless in its activities.

### **The RAMSI response**

In July 2003 a multinational force arrived at the invitation of the Solomon Islands Government. Their task was to assist the Government in restoring law and order and in rebuilding the country's institutions. The Regional Assistance Mission for Solomon Islands (RAMSI) known as "Helpum fren" (helping a friend) had three broad functions. Firstly, it included a military arm to win and keep the peace. 1,700 troops arrived from nine countries in the region. Ke'ke

and other militant leaders surrendered within weeks of their arrival. Under an amnesty, over 3,700 weapons including about 700 high-powered military-style weapons were removed from circulation. The security situation stabilized quickly and the foreign troop numbers were reduced accordingly.

The second aim of RAMSI, the restoration of law and order, involved some 300 police from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and other regional countries. It has been largely successful and the climate of fear has diminished. Justice has been pursued effectively enough. With so many police directly involved in the atrocities and corruption, much reform had to occur and the force has been overhauled. Charges have been laid against such militants as Ke'ke, but also senior police. Many people have been arrested, most for violent crimes – murder, abduction, rape and robbery. Prisons have been repaired and courts restored. The ability to investigate crimes effectively has been important. It develops confidence in the country's ability to protect people, ensures justice is done, enables true reconciliation to occur, and builds the future where people know such violence should not happen again. This contrasts with the case in East Timor where there was a lack of political will and capacity to bring the perpetrators to justice. In the Solomon Islands, some perpetrators of the militant violence have already been sentenced. There are many to be followed up, but the process of evidence gathering is taking place and the willingness to reliably prosecute is clear. Corrupt politicians and businessmen are being called to account. Convictions against prominent and powerful figures will be a test of the integrity and credibility the Solomon Islands judiciary. There are public allegations against corrupt politicians but

they are yet to be called to account formally.

The third arm of the RAMSI response involves institutional capacity building. Inter alia this involves stabilising finances, balancing the budget, cleaning up and improving revenue collection, and putting in place the conditions for economic growth, for attracting foreign investors, and for rebuilding the local economy. This requires addressing long-term developmental needs. Endemic corruption in the political leadership makes this a complex task. Ministers of the crown personally profited through deals with companies, which had deleterious effects on villagers. RAMSI has strengthened accountability mechanisms to combat the



Felicity Rousseaux, Peter Hosking SJ and Fr Lionel conducting a trauma-training workshop at Marasa, Weathercoast.  
*Photo: Br Edmund (Melanesian Brotherhood)*

culture of corruption. Some of those currently in public office are expected to be charged. It is important to rebuild the public service to ensure it can deliver services not only to Honiara, but also to people in the Provinces. There are some who will be critical of Australia's efforts. Some of these are people whose interests are not met by accountable, transparent government. The RAMSI mission will benefit from the popular will to change. People are tired of the violence that

crippled their country and want enduring reform.

### **What lies ahead?**

While many lost faith in the government's ability to find solutions in recent years, they did not lose trust in their strong community life and respected religious traditions. There is a more secure environment in the villages after years of conflict. The sociopolitical changes help provide a firm basis from which to rebuild. There are many resources among the people upon which to build. Solomon Islanders have an enormous capacity for courage and commitment. Political reform is not only about having competent, honest and committed bureaucrats and politicians. It requires an understanding of the traditional structures in the rural areas and the role of women and men in the clan, and of hereditary chiefs who exercise leadership in communities.

RAMSI is not always aware of the local people's role or capacity. Its efforts at capacity building need to respect the attitudes and culture of the people. Policies and development plans designed by foreign experts in offices in Honiara may look fine on paper but are not as easily applied to the reality of life of people in the villages. It is important that development respects the rights, livelihood and dignity of the Solomon Island people especially those who are most marginalized. 90% of the population lives outside of Honiara and most live simple lives. They have never had the benefit of an effective centralised government. RAMSI needs to work with local church communities and traditional leaders as much as it does with bureaucrats in Honiara.

Reconciliation is an ongoing concern in places where there has been a lot of violence. Former militants suspected of crimes are still in the Weathercoast area. There are people who perpetrated violence living in the same neighbourhood as their

victims. Some of these are kept in check by the presence of RAMSI but there is still ongoing tension and issues of truth telling and restorative justice will be important in the coming months, years and even decades. This process can take many decades, for example in Bougainville, the recent series of reconciliation ceremonies date back to offences carried out in World War 2. As well as the mechanisms of retributive justice (the formal processes of police, court, conviction, prison), there are also traditional restitution offerings and reconciliation ceremonies that need to be appreciated. Many people have ongoing reactions to the trauma they experienced. Many experience anger, anxiety, shame, depression, as well as trying to cope with shattered assumptions and changed relationships. Trauma affects people at both individual and communal levels and recovery is a process that needs support.

With 43% of the population under 15 years, the educational and employment prospects for the young are crucial for the future of the Solomon's. Without effort to support them, the capacity for them to become disaffected and used by greedy and violent opportunists remains. The education system must be supported to develop people's skills to contribute to their village community and broader society to the best of their capacity.

Places like the Weathercoast still have many reconstruction issues. Many struggle for the basics of life: clean water, adequate shelter and nutritious food. The aid response has been sketchy. Places in Northwest Malaita are in social and cultural transition adjusting to the forced re-location of people from Guadalcanal. Subsistence agriculture remains the principal means of livelihood for the majority of the people and requires ongoing support. Some villages also have mineral and other resources and communities may need the right advice about how to negotiate these assets to ascertain the true will of the people and avoid exploitation.

Many are deeply convinced that land is the issue that lies at the heart of the country's problems. It drove the last five years of social unrest. In most cases it is much more than clarifying land titles. The land underlies people's collective identities and is the principal source of livelihood and security. Most of the population live off the land and sea resources. Registration and commercialisation does not fit easily within traditional customary understanding of the land. Many see the land as something that is spiritual and part of their identity. However others see it as many Westerners do – something that can make profit. The long term issues of land reform and economic development remain.

### **Australia's role?**

RAMSI has been an experiment for the region. The 2000 Biketawa Resolution of the 16 leaders of Pacific Islands Forum paved the way for the Forum to facilitate active measures to assist in a member's troubles. Coups in Fiji, the Bougainville secessionist conflict, systemic issues in Papua New Guinea attracted the concern of countries in the region. Many features in the Solomon Islands are shared throughout Pacific. These include the clash between traditional ways of life and modernity, the way local group loyalties take precedence over national interests, and the meager educational and health resources. A lack of sustainable economic development will lead to further problems.

The Solomon Islands had requested assistance since 1999 but it was not until mid-2003 that Australia responded. The hurt and suffering of the people of the Solomon Islands simply worsened over the four years period before Australia finally responded. By then Australia had intervened militarily in three other countries: East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq. The interventions into Afghanistan and Iraq raised issues in terms of

international law and military strategy. Many were concerned that these seemed to be driven from Washington rather than Canberra. Our role in East Timor, while well intentioned, was not always well executed.

Any foreign intervention will attempt to balance national interests and humanitarian motives. Australia's eventual decision to intervene in the Solomon Islands was made for Australia's own security and national interests as much as it was for humanitarian concern for the people of the Solomons. A prime motivation for Australia's intervention was the fear of a "failing state" on our doorstep. Australian analysts were concerned about the potential for the Solomon Islands' territories to become a haven for terrorists, drug runners, people smugglers, etc. In recent years these security issues and domestic budgetary targets have become dominant criteria in shaping Australian foreign policy. International solidarity within a community of nations would have Australia rely more on humanitarian principles such as concern for a neighbour urgently in need.

The process of rebuilding the institutions of government and of economic reform in the Solomon Islands is a serious task. Australia is important in the South Pacific and our involvement must be discerned and well implemented. Much money was spent on the Australian defence force in the Solomons last year. We hope that more can be given to the Solomon Islanders for their development needs in the coming years. The 'development' dollar is inevitably worth more to the Solomon Islanders than the 'defence' dollar. The Australian Prime Minister Howard promised, "RAMSI will remain until the job is done". Australia's motive should be that of one who seeks to serve rather than of one who wants to rule, a genuine *helpum fren*. If it were otherwise, fears associated with neo-colonialism become real indeed. ■

## Internet resources

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- ABC Radio Australia, Asia Pacific, <http://www.abc.net.au/ra/asiapac>
- ABC Asia Pacific, <http://www.abcasiapacific.com>
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- Australian Strategic Policy Institute, "Our Failing Neighbour," Policy Report, June 2003, <http://www.aspi.org.au/solomons>
- AusAID, Country Programs: Solomon Islands, <http://www.ausaid.gov.au/country/country.cfm?CountryId=16>
- Australian Department of Defence, Operation Anode, <http://www.defence.gov.au/opanode>
- Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Solomon Islands country profile, [http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/solomon\\_islands](http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/solomon_islands)
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- CIA World Factbook 2004, Solomon Islands, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/bp.html>
- Pacific Magazine, <http://www.pacificmagazine.net>
- Peter Hosking interviews the Melanesian Brothers on the ABC Religion Report, <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/relrpt/stories/s1156164.htm>
- Peter Hosking, "Recovering from Trauma in the Solomons," Jesuits Australia News, <http://info.jesuit.org.au/info/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=129>
- Solomon Islands' People First Network, <http://www.peoplefirst.net.sb>
- ReliefWeb, Solomon Islands, <http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/ByCountry/000CB14B8972F6D549256D860018ED4A?OpenDocument&StartKey=Solomon+Islands&ExpandView>
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- UN Development Fund for Women, Solomon Islands country report, [http://www.womenwarpeace.org/solomon\\_islands/solomon\\_islands.htm](http://www.womenwarpeace.org/solomon_islands/solomon_islands.htm)
- The World Gazetteer, Solomon Islands, [http://www.world-gazetteer.com/r/r\\_sb.htm](http://www.world-gazetteer.com/r/r_sb.htm)
- World Socialist Web Site, Analysis on the Solomon Islands, <http://www.wsws.org/sections/category/news/au-solom.shtml>

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*The author:* Peter Hosking SJ, a Jesuit priest and trauma counsellor, spent 3 weeks on the Solomon Islands helping the Anglican Melanesian Brothers deal with the continuing impact of the crisis, including the murder of 7 of their members.