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RAMSI AND SOLOMON ISLANDS: HISTORY AND CHALLENGES FOR CIVIL-MILITARY INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT

At the outset it is worth making the point that the work and experience of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands or RAMSI is very much relevant to the themes of the conference of civil-military-police interaction. At its inception in 2003, RAMSI was conceived as a *comprehensive* mission that would involve police, military and development components. It would also be a *long-term* mission, which was envisaged to last for about ten years. From the beginning, it has always had a civilian leader, the RAMSI Special Coordinator, and has been a *police led* operation, with the military playing a supporting role.

Key Words: Solomon Islands, RAMSI, police led operation, long-term mission

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INTRODUCTION

At the outset it is worth making the point that the work and experience of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands or RAMSI is very much relevant to the themes of the conference of civil-military-police interaction. At its inception in 2003, RAMSI was conceived as a *comprehensive* mission that would involve police, military and development components. It would also be a *long-term* mission, which was envisaged to last for about ten years. From the beginning, it has always had a civilian leader, the RAMSI Special Coordinator, and has been a *police led* operation, with the military playing a supporting role.

My presentation is divided into two parts. In the first part, I provide a brief outline of the history of RAMSI, touch on some recent developments, and also make some passing comments about the future of RAMSI and some of the challenges it faces. In the second part, I sketch and highlight, essentially in bullet point form, some points from the RAMSI experience that are relevant to the Conference themes of civil- military interaction.

HISTORY

The story of RAMSI will be broadly familiar to many here, particularly those from Australia and the region. In 2003, the Solomon Islands Government and the 15 other member countries of the Pacific Islands Forum agreed to the formation of RAMSI. This was in response to a request for outside assistance from the then Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Sir Allan Kemakeza, initially to the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard. It followed a period known as “the tensions” which lasted from 1998-2003, during which there was conflict between rival militant groups representing the peoples of Guadalcanal and Malaita. The tension period was marked by violence, lawlessness, economic decline and a breakdown in government services, particularly in the capital, Honiara. With the agreement of Pacific Island Forum members, and in accordance with the 2000 Biketawa Declaration, the RAMSI Treaty was passed and enabling domestic legislation, the Facilitation of International Assistance Act, was also passed unanimously by the Solomon Islands Parliament.

On 24 July 2003, RAMSI arrived in Solomon Islands with a mandate to:

- restore civil order in Honiara and throughout the country – by strengthening the rule of law.
- stabilise government finances.
- promote longer-term economic recovery and revive business confidence – this was to be done mainly by strengthening economic governance and creating the conditions for broad-based economic growth.
- rebuild the machinery of government - including by promoting transparent and accountable governance and by supporting efforts to reduce corruption.

RAMSI's initial objectives of restoring law and order and stabilising government finances were achieved surprisingly quickly. There were thousands of weapons removed from the community, numerous high-level arrests, reconstitution of the police force, finances brought under control and the national budgets balanced.

History (Continued)

Since the restoration of law and order in 2003, RAMSI's attention has largely been focused on the challenging process of rebuilding the institutions of the Solomon Islands State. Many of these institutions, it has to be said, had been in a state of disrepair and decline before "the tensions" and this had largely been the case since Solomon Islands achieved independence from the United Kingdom in 1978. The long-term process of rebuilding Solomon Islands institutions is carried forward to this day under three pillars: Law and Justice, Economic Governance, and Machinery of Government (which includes programs such as the strengthening of national accountability institutions, Public Service improvement, parliamentary strengthening, electoral strengthening, provincial government strengthening and Women in Government).

After its initial successes in 2003, RAMSI experienced a difficult period between April 2006 and December 2007. There was the setback of the April 2006 Honiara riots, which were brought about by the election as Prime Minister of Snyder Rini, and then a period of strained relations between RAMSI and the then Prime Minister, and now member of the Opposition, Manasseh Sogavare. The election of the Government led by Derek Sikua at the end of 2007 paved the way for an improvement in relations between RAMSI and the Solomon Islands government, which was marked by a renewed spirit of cooperation and dialogue.

PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK

An important milestone for RAMSI and Solomon Islands was the establishment of the Partnership Framework, which was approved by Solomon Islands cabinet in May 2009, endorsed by Pacific Island Leaders at the Forum in August 2009 and tabled in the Solomon Islands Parliament in November 2009. The Partnership Framework is essentially a strategic work plan to guide RAMSI's assistance to Solomon Islands into the foreseeable future. It sets out mutually agreed objectives for RAMSI's work, and milestones or targets for achieving these, and identifies three cross-cutting themes - capacity development, anti-corruption and gender equality – which are relevant to the work RAMSI does across the three pillars of law and order, economic governance and machinery of government. It also provides a means of assessing and measuring results by setting out indicative timeframes and target dates. The Partnership Framework is also a "living document" which can be adjusted to take account of changing circumstances and priorities. Lastly, it provides a mechanism for jointly assessing progress towards meeting the Framework's goals and targets.

TRANSITION

Against the backdrop of the April 2006 riots, the August 2010 general elections represented a test for both Solomon Islands, and in particular the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF), and RAMSI. The elections themselves were conducted largely in a peaceful and orderly manner, aside from a couple of minor law and order issues, and the subsequent election of the new Prime Minister, Danny Philip, passed without incident. From a security perspective, this was an excellent result. This was due in part to a lengthy period of operational security planning between the RSIPF and RAMSI. The RSIPF led the planning and conducted an election security operation, with RAMSI police and military forces playing a supporting role. The RSIPF performed credibly in both the elections and, more recently, during an incident in Honiara on 30 November 2011 when a sizeable crowd of youths, mainly from the settlement areas of Honiara, caused a disturbance in Honiara's Chinatown.

The RSIPF's performance in both cases will have gone some way to rebuilding public trust and confidence in the RSIPF as an institution. This is important. The RSIPF's reputation was severely dented by the involvement of many of its officers in incidents during the tensions, and it has very much been a broken and divided force. Moreover, many senior politicians and Solomon Islanders have consistently said both publicly and privately that RAMSI can't leave Solomon Islands until the public has trust and confidence in the RSIPF. Work is underway to address some of the underlying issues which divided the RSIPF, and which date back to the tension period, particularly through the introduction of a Voluntary Early Retirement scheme. There is also a broader plan being implemented to introduce a community officer scheme, especially in the provinces, which essentially reprises a scheme that was in place in Solomon Islands during British colonial rule.

Time precludes me from discussing these in detail here. But there are a couple of themes I want to highlight. The first is that from a RAMSI point of view, we have been very careful to emphasise that the RSIPF is the lead security agency in Solomon Islands. During the elections, RSIPF officers were at the forefront of the security campaign, and conspicuously so, with PPF and RAMSI military in the background - a point that was noticed and commented on by international election observers. This says much about RAMSI's role in Solomon Islands, which is about supporting and helping to rebuild Solomon Islands institutions and providing the likes of the RSIPF with the confidence to enable them to do their jobs; and this is certainly true across the work RAMSI does. Indeed, in both the security and development sectors, we are especially conscious of the need to provide sufficient *space* to enable Solomon Islanders to become more autonomous and independent in the conduct of their affairs and, just as importantly, to enable the government and Solomon Islanders to address the very many issues confronting the country. This includes, for example, addressing issues related to the tension period, which is underway through a Solomon Islands generated Truth and Reconciliation Commission process. In short, RAMSI can't and shouldn't try to do everything.

This dovetails neatly into the second theme I want to highlight which is that in the wake of the 2010 elections, RAMSI has begun to drawdown the size of its police and military forces. The focus of the Participating Police Force (the PPF or RAMSI police) is now turning away from conducting frontline policing to focusing increasingly on capacity development. This is consistent with a broader process that is currently taking place where RAMSI is entering a transition phase of planning in a more deliberate and concrete way for phasing down RAMSI and for RAMSI's eventual exit from Solomon Islands. This is a challenging task, and getting it right is crucial. RAMSI has been largely successful and can claim a number of achievements. At the same time it should be recognised that there have been some setbacks, that there perhaps could have been some things done differently and that it will ultimately be judged on how it leaves and what it leaves behind. In terms of the core work of rebuilding the institutions of government, including the police force, RAMSI is particularly conscious to ensure that the support it provides is aimed at leaving behind institutions which are sustainable, affordable, and appropriate for the Solomon Islands.

CIVIL- MILITARY INTERACTION DEVELOPMENTS

For the second part of my presentation, I want to highlight a number of initiatives, issues, factors or themes from the RAMSI experience which are I think relevant to the Conference themes.

I want to start by outlining what I would call some “no-brainers”. These are things which might be considered obvious or self-evident, and which perhaps need not be dwelt on here. They include:

- the need to understand and respect local language and custom;
- regular consultation with stakeholders;
- having a clear mandate, which helps to avoid “mission creep”;
- the need to engage with the local community; and
- the importance of consistent, coherent and co-ordinated messages.

There is a number of what might loosely be called strategic level factors which have assisted RAMSI to do its job.

Consent and Legitimacy

The fact that RAMSI was invited into Solomon Islands, that the mission had regional endorsement from the Pacific Islands Forum and that its presence in Solomon Islands is provided for in domestic Solomon Islands law has and continues to be crucial in terms of legitimising the mission and its work. Similarly, the fact that RAMSI is a regional mission, with every Pacific Island Forum country contributing personnel to the mission, provides additional legitimacy.

Clearly Defined Structure and Roles

The RAMSI Special Coordinator provides policy oversight and guidance for the entire mission. This helps to ensure that there is policy coordination and coherence across the mission. There is a clear understanding that the role of the military is to support the police. Similarly, it is clear that the PPF act in support of the RSIPF, and that the RSIPF is the lead agency for providing law and order and security in Solomon Islands.

Formal Mechanisms for Consultation and Engagement

In addition to setting out RAMSI’s work, the Partnership Framework provides a useful mechanism for engaging with the Solomon Islands Government. There is also “the Triumvirate” which is made up of the Special Coordinator, a SIG representative and a representative of the Pacific Islands Forum. It meets every few months, or as required. And during the Sikua Government, it was agreed that there would be regular meetings with Cabinet, which provided Ministers with the opportunity to ask questions directly of RAMSI.

WORKING LEVEL OBSERVATIONS

I will conclude with a couple of working-level observations.

Posting Duration

One of the real issues we face in RAMSI is the constant churn in staff. In the case of the military, they are on four month rotations; some police are on six or twelve month rotations; and some civilian staff are on twelve or twenty-four month duration. The constant churn in staff across the mission makes it difficult for corporate memory to be retained, and for building and maintaining relationships with Solomon Islands and RAMSI counterparts. This is a problem that is difficult to address. In the case of the military, however, we have been helped in recent times by the fact the Commander of the Combined Task Force, the RAMSI military, has now been extended from four month to one year terms, and similarly the Deputy Commander now serves an eight month posting.

Relationships

As a multi-country, multi-agency mission, building and developing relationships is crucial. Understanding how different agencies work is particularly important. On the security side, for instance, police and military forces have different cultures and ways of operating. Mutual understanding of respective differences and how other agencies work is essential. Strong personal relationships are particularly important in this regard. I also think it has been helpful and important to have most of the RAMSI leadership co-located on the one base. When difficult issues arise, as they inevitably do from time to time, there is nothing like being able to discuss them face to face. In RAMSI's case, the Special Coordinator and the Commanders of the PPF and CTF are co-located.