

SOLOMON ISLANDS

And the failing of a nation



Photos by Olga Yoldi

Australia has just launched its largest armed intervention in the South Pacific since World War II. But restoring law and order, without serious economic development, may not bring peace to the Solomon Islands. OLGA YOLDI reports.

It is a far cry from the pristine palm fringed beaches on tourist brochures. In the outskirts of Honiara the outlook is bleak. As we drive in the bright afternoon light, I see rows of run down houses and children playing in the streets. Poverty is visible everywhere. The driver tells me that the situation is not getting any better, “law and order is our biggest problem. No government has managed peace so far, no matter how hard they try.

It is late afternoon and the heat is oppressive. Groups of young men roam the streets. Honiara is a small town, spread over a hill overlooking a shimmering harbour. The main street is dusty and almost seedy. A group of vendors are selling vegetables, fruit, fish, betel nut and jewellery. The market is crowded, but life is a struggle for Joanna, a teacher, mother of two, who complements her wages selling chickens. She still remembers vividly the coup and the unrest that followed. “Everyone wanted power, everyone wanted to be the boss.” Our conversation is suddenly interrupted by people cheering. I walk over and see two men fighting, one of them is bleeding badly. Nobody has called the police. There is no functioning police force in the Solomon Islands and, for that matter, no functioning government either.

The Solomon Islands is an archipelago of 992 islands stretching over 840 miles in the South Pacific, with a population of nearly half a million people that speak 87 local languages, including Pidgin English. Migration from all directions over thousands of years has produced a country rich in cultural diversity. Melanesians, Polynesians, Asians and Micronesians call the islands home, with rich traditions and ancient customs still practiced in thousands of small villages.

After they were discovered by Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendana in 1567, the Solomon Islands were lost for centuries, until whalers and traders disturbed the peace with their shonky business practices and diseased bodies. During the later

part of the 19th century, labour recruiters known as ‘blackbirders’ raided the islands to supply indentured labourers for the Queensland and Fiji plantations. Approximately 30,000 islanders are believed to have been taken as labourers. The islanders grew to hate traders and would often kill any white person they saw, so the Solomon Islands quickly gained the reputation for being the most inhospitable place in the Pacific. Even the missionaries watched their step.

The British colonial administration had made little effort to develop the country, economically or socially so the colony was poorly prepared for nationhood. At independence in 1978, Solomon Islanders adopted the Westminster system of government and were introduced to party politics, but the institutions needed to run an effective democracy were inadequate and the traditional leadership systems, that had ruled the Solomon Islands for decades, were ignored.

The post independence period could be described as a long story with a sad ending. It is a story of weak governments struggling for legitimacy, of economic stagnation and a population growth capable of fuelling constant disputes over land and resources. A story of tribal violence and governments attempting to keep law and order in a country where corruption and criminality became the norm, turning it gradually and inexorably into a failed state. No wonder former Prime Minister Solomon Mamaloni would describe the Solomon Islands as “a nation that was conceived but is yet to be born.”

Ethnic tensions

Land has been central to the ethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands. Over the years, the population in the island of Malaita grew while land became scarce. Many Malaitans saw the bigger and less populated island of Guadalcanal as a vacant land and decided to migrate there. If only a few dozens



SOLOMON ISLANDS And the failing of a nation

had done so instead of thousands, it may have worked. But with time, the numbers of Malaitan settlers grew and so did the tensions between locals and new settlers.

In 1999 disputes over land and resources took a dangerous turn when militant Guadalcanal youth calling themselves the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) began arming themselves with World War II vintage rifles and home made guns. The IFM set about driving Malaitans from Guadalcanal. The government initially dismissed these activities as isolated incidents, but 20,000 Malaitans fled their homes. Many took refuge in Honiara, others returned to Malaita, even local residents of Honiara left the city. A state of emergency was declared in Guadalcanal. Despite several efforts to negotiate a cease-fire, the conflict continued unabated throughout 1999.

Hostilities intensified in 2000 when the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) emerged. Using stolen weapons from police armouries in Auki (Malaita), the MEF launched an armed struggle against the IFM and Guadalcanal villagers. Both militias turned Honiara and settlements east and west of the city into a battleground. Two hundred people died, thousands were displaced and villages burnt. In June 2000, the MEF, supported by disaffected police officers, staged a coup and took Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu hostage, demanding his resignation. The militants claimed that his government had failed to compensate for loss of Malaitan life and properties and he was forced to resign. Ulufa'alu had asked the Australian government to send police to assist in protecting him and his government from a coup, but the Australian government declined, saying it would be seen as an intrusion into the sovereignty of the country.

Following the coup the key export earners, the Gold Ridge gold mine and oil palm plantations ceased operations and aid was suspended. The economy faltered, government revenue plummeted and government services were disrupted. Manasseh Sogavare became Prime Minister, but his government was corrupt and his actions contributed significantly to an economic decline and a deterioration of law and order.

Growing pressure from civil society, business groups and the international community led to the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement

in October 2000 by members of the MEF, IFM and the government. The Agreement provided a framework for consolidating peace. It provided for disarmament, compensation, reconciliation and development. A monitoring council was charged with responsibility for its implementation.

The Agreement was based on trust and confidence, but not all promises made were honoured and complying with its terms proved a lot more challenging in reality than on paper. The war ended only to be replaced by endemic, low level violence and intimidation by former militants who created a gang culture in Honiara. University of Hawai Researcher, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka Tara, sees "Townsville as being important because it provided for cessation of violence ... it didn't bring peace. We were given five days to negotiate the future of the Solomon Islands after experiencing two years of crisis. We have always had a weak state in the Solomons. We put too much hope in a very weak government that was incapable of taking over from Townsville and creating changes young people wanted the government to create."

National Peace Council Chairman, Paul Tovua believes that the conditions were totally unrealistic. "The Agreement was thought to lay the foundations for an equitable society, for equitable distribution of resources, so they came up with this list of development ideas for Malaita that was unrealistic. All this was written without thinking about finance and without conducting prior economic assessments," he says.

But the biggest obstacle to peace has been the reluctance of many former militants to hand in their weapons, one of the most important conditions of the Agreement. "We didn't succeed there because militants were and still are fearful of reprisals by those they have harmed," Tovua explains. "A lot of young people realise power comes from a barrel of a gun," writes American academic, David Capie, "and if you have a weapon you become an important person and get to resources and things you couldn't otherwise have." Capie believes that it was the uncontrolled circulation of weapons that fuelled the conflict in the first place and is now preventing peace. "Easy access to weapons might make a difference between a dispute being settled by peaceful or violent means. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Solomon Islands, where the loss of control over a few hundred military firearms led

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Family life is important for Solomon Islanders

to a coup and to a state of ongoing instability.”

According to the MEF spokesperson, Andrew Nori, full disarmament has never been achieved in any post-conflict society and will not be achieved in the Solomons either. “The UN has been dealing with disarmament all over the world and that is their finding.” However, the leaders of the MEF have agreed to hand in their weapons. In fact, all groups were expected to do so under the amnesty, which run out in August 21.

The National Peace Council is confident that peace can be achieved by engaging all civil society groups, including traditional leaders, in all peace building efforts. They believe that by restoring the traditional patterns of authority, undermined by the conflict, some degree of social order could be achieved in the villages. However disarming ex-militants proved problematic because officers won’t arrest those they perceive as their kin.

The Agreement also stipulated the appointment of 200 former militants (100 MEF and 100 IMF) as special constables, but in actual fact the numbers went up to 2,000, placing an enormous burden on the government’s payroll system. It also provided for compensation to those affected by violence and displacement. However, very few legitimate compensation cases were settled; instead large sums were disbursed to former militant leaders and political leaders.

THE MYTH OF DEVELOPMENT

On my last day in the Solomons I venture outside Honiara. It is a beautiful morning and the sun is piercing through very tall trees. As I travel through narrow, slightly mountainous roads, to the war affected areas, I have an opportunity to observe village life. The driver is negotiating his way across the jungle with some difficulty but does not seem disturbed by it. I see villages, some of the houses destroyed, others burnt out and a few luckily still standing. “These homes were destroyed by the MEF,” the driver explains to me, “but those ones near the palm trees were actually burnt much earlier by the IFM.” We stop in a peace monitoring post, part of the National Peace Council’s activities and speak to the guard. “What we desperately need in this country is development, jobs and education,” he explains.

Indeed, without education or income ex-militants will continue to turn to crime. Poverty and high youth unemployment are contributing to the unrest, exacerbated by a chronic failure of the state to address problems and develop the nation. Although development has been high on the political agenda, most of the Solomon Islands to this day remain underdeveloped. “The village remains the heart of the nation but are the least helped,” Dr John Roughan says. “Their lifestyle has deteriorated markedly and today’s health, education and social services have fallen to low levels.”

SOLOMON ISLANDS And the failing of a nation

Dr Roughan, an American former priest, attributes the failure of development to poor governance. He has lived in the Solomon Islands as long as he can remember. In the 1950s he founded the Solomon Islands Development Trust, which he still manages with aid funds from a Dutch Charity, and has devoted most of his life to improve the quality of life in the villages, where 85 per cent of the population lives.

“There has been an avoidance to look at the village as the resource base. Our resources are on the ground: rivers, lakes, trees, fisheries... the resource base should be the centre of investment,” he adds, “but the government says: ‘concentrate your investment dollars in big operations - gold mines, wharf and road construction, et cetera - as they will bring back returns.’ My question is: Returns to the nation? or, returns to the elite that runs the nation? If they invested in the village the return to the elite wouldn’t be much, so they go for the big operations and this way they think they will get the money to finance social, education and health services,” he says. “The theory looks good, in practice it doesn’t work because the elite never has enough. It always wants more. The eradication of poverty would mean a shift of power, but we don’t want to talk about that! This is the pattern of governance here. The politicians look at it this way: ‘Us first, the people second.’”

Professor, John Connell from Sydney University says that cultural fragmentation and the scattered nature of the islands have inhibited economic development. “The Solomon Islands can’t compete in a conventional sense with other countries to find niche markets,” he says. “Governance is a problem. The Central Bank is pushing reform programs, but there is also a strong push for proper governance from aid donors, who are frustrated by the government’s lack of response.”

Only months before Sir Allan Kemakeza, from the People’s Alliance Party, was elected Prime Minister in 2001, he had been sacked as Deputy Prime Minister, for allegedly helping himself to compensation for civil war victims. The biggest challenge for Kemakeza has been finding enough money for special constables claiming to have suffered by being sworn at during the civil war. “Paying off the trouble makers has been the policy of the government,” Dr Roughan says. “You pay the

blackmailer and it is good for a period of time but they are back again and this is what is happening.”

Last December the country’s finance minister resigned in protest after Kemakeza asked him to allocate more funds for the special constables. Small wonder that the country is on the verge of bankruptcy. A visiting IMF team concluded the government’s policy “would entail disastrously, a further increase in budgetary and debt arrears, loss of donor financial assistance, intensified exchange restrictions and eventual economic collapse.”

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The Asian Development Bank’s latest report described the situation as “desperate”. In fact, it is so bad that the government did not even have enough funds for parliament to sit and neglected to pay the electricity bill and the salaries of its public servants, sparking hospital and school strikes and leaving its international debt unpaid. The report said that the economy had contracted by 26 per cent since 1998. Only 5 per cent of the population is employed in the formal sector of the economy, the rest make a living from farming

cash crops. The Solomons’ economy relies on gold and palm oil exports, both of which collapsed as a result of the ethnic conflict, leaving logging and fisheries as the only income sources.

Since 1978, timber has earned \$US1.3 billion and the sale of fishing rights to Japanese firms has added substantially to this income. According to Foreign Correspondent, Mary Louise O’Callaghan, it is estimated that 90 per cent of the Solomon’s consolidated revenue does not even reach the country’s Treasury, “but is handed out in bribes, bogus allowances and ‘compensation’ payments to whoever possesses a gun and demands money.”

Journalist Robert Keith Reid writes that cases of corruption grew to be dealings not costing just a mere few hundred thousand dollars but hundreds of millions. “Melanesia is notorious as the Pacific’s most fertile ground for massive corruption, usually centering on the bribery of political and public service leaders by foreign exploiters of Melanesia’s forests, mineral and fisheries wealth,” he wrote. “Illegal logging by Asian Timber companies has cost the Solomons hundreds of million of dollars in lost development revenue.” According to Reid, Asian logging interests were instrumental in engineering a change of government by providing money used to bribe opposition MPs to government



The market in Honiara

sides. “Former Primer Minister Solomon Mamaloni granted extraordinary concessions including massive tax relief to his logging pals and was equally corrupt in handing out fishing licenses,” he writes.

In the last 25 years the government received \$1.1 billion in aid. A recent report issued by Helen Hughes from the Centre for Independent Studies, called for the suspension of foreign aid. “The Solomons’ economic problems arise from development strategies that combine the exploitation of economic rents (unearned windfall incomes) from natural resources (timber and fish) with communal and government welfare. Bilateral and multilateral aid has supported these strategies, with rents from aid adding to resource rents to create swollen government and a culture of corruption that, with joblessness, has led to crime.” She recommended that funds be disbursed only on the evidence of met targets and audited expenditures. “Without such changes Australian aid will continue to damage the Pacific.”

Dr Roughan says that there has been a tendency to use aid money in consumption rather than development. “On Election Day a villager becomes a Minister and he is administering millions of dollars donated by aid donors, with no previous preparation or guidance. He sees it as his wealth, and, you are expecting him not to waste it?” he says. “These countries need to understand the context in which they are sending the funds, otherwise donors are just as much at fault as recipients.”

After years of working in the longest established and most widely recognised NGO in the Solomon Islands, Dr Roughan has come to the conclusion that development is just a myth that we tend to perpetuate. “After 50 years of development only 24 out of 187 countries are developed,” he says. “The concept most people have of development is what is happening in the United States or Canada and that is the light they are going towards ... it is an unattainable goal. Development simply means a dignified life, health, education and some degree of prosperity.”

THE POLICEMAN OF THE PACIFIC

The Australian government perceives failing states in the Pacific as a threat to Australia, a potential haven for drug running, money laundering and terrorism. But it is also the illegal traffic of arms that poses a threat to the stability of the region as a whole. A study ‘Small Arms in the Pacific’ published by the Geneva based *Small Arms Survey*, has revealed that the Pacific is awash with illegal guns and lax security. “Whether they spring from inadequately guarded state armouries or unmonitored private stocks, it is clear that the current mechanisms often fail to prevent the transfer of small arms from legal owners to criminals,” the report says. “The 3.1 million guns in civilian hands in the region outnumber those of the armed forces and police by nearly 14 to 1.”

As Australian troops landed in the Solomon

SOLOMON ISLANDS And the failing of a nation

Islands, the Prime Minister, John Howard gave a strong indication the Federal Government was prepared to intervene in other Pacific trouble spots. "Very importantly, the Australian intervention will send a signal to other countries in the region that help is available if it is sought, that we do have a desire to help all the peoples of the Pacific to have conditions of law and order, hope, peace and stability for their future generations," Mr Howard said.

Restoring law and order may take longer than planned. Taking into consideration the resources needed for logistic support and administration, it is uncertain whether the 2000 Australian police and military will be able to tackle the law and order problem beyond Honiara. A bigger force may be required to deal with criminals fleeing to remote areas.

But until the causes of the conflict are resolved there will be no lasting peace, no matter how many Australian troops are deployed. As norm Dixon wrote, "an Australian military intervention cannot begin to solve problems that are the legacy of more than a century of imperialist economic domination and the inability of the capitalist system to develop poor societies."

Until land ownership is resolved there will be no gains from development. Land is life in the Solomon Islands, so a land reform needs to be a vital element of peace building. Bishop of Malaita, Terry Brown recommends Australia should support a program for the registration of customary land. Unlike other Pacific nations, more than 90 per cent of land in the Solomons is held through "customary land tenure"-that is, corporate ownership of land by a whole tribe. "There is no system for legally registering this land with clear boundaries, genealogies and land trusts. The result is an endless string of land disputes, dividing communities and bringing violence," he wrote. When cases are appealed, the High Court tends to give ownership of the land to an individual on behalf of the tribe, who can then register or sell the land as 'alienated land.' According to Brown, this system is constantly abused and has enabled the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources by foreign investors, who gain access to the land by paying bribes to these individuals.

The establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission will enable the people of the Solomon Islands to confront and deal with the past constructively. It will also help perpetrators to reintegrate into their former communities. Many senior politicians and police have been involved in militia activity, some as leaders as well as in crime and corruption and they are now saying that

any crimes committed in the past will be exempt from foreign military and police prosecution. But many people are against giving a blanket amnesty to perpetrators. As Adrian Smith, Catholic Archbishop of Honiara, wrote, "great harm has been done to our people over the past three years. It will be difficult to go forward if perpetrators of serious crimes are allowed to go unpunished." So far the biggest breakthrough of the Australian-led intervention force has been the negotiations that led to Harold Keke's surrender. Keke, a former militant, has been accused of killing more than 50 people in Weathercoast, a remote area in Guadalcanal. The surrender of Keke is important for the disarming of other remnant militia groups and criminal gangs.

A return to the rule of law must be matched with a long-term strategy to help villages get back to self-sufficiency. Aid money may need to be invested in health and education. Most parents cannot even afford to send their children to high school. Free education is vital. As Bishop Terry Brown writes, "without education, the pool of illiterate, dissatisfied, disappointed youth will simply grow. They form the pool that will produce the terrorists that Australia is so afraid of."

Building the judiciary and the police force are vital steps towards peace, but so is economic development. Most importantly, it will be necessary to listen to what the Solomon Islanders really want from this intervention. Economic development should also contribute to the rise and involvement of civil society. This will prevent government corruption and will help to create ownership and accountability. Village communities need to participate because without real transformation the initial phase of optimism may give way to resentment.

In my last few hours in Honiara I read about the constant frustrations of living in a failed state. The editor of the *Solomon Star* describes the pain and hardship Solomon Islanders have experienced since independence and the mistakes made by governments. Many believe that it is the family, religion and cultural ties that have held Solomon Islanders together, but if it won't take long before frustration turns to desperation. "It'll take years to correct ourselves but some of the damages we have created are beyond repair," he writes. "We have to live with them from generation to generation. Just look at the mess since independence. How will we correct it?"