

Chairman, Hon. Members, Colleague Premiers, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Your invitation for me to respond to questions about the presence and roles of RAMSI in Solomon Islands reached me only yesterday! If I have been given several days to prepare the answers, they would probably be a lot better than what I am relating to you now. Nevertheless, it gives me great pleasure to participate in the Review process of the International Facilitation Assistance Act, which is the piece of legislation that has enabled RAMSI to assist the Solomons.

We are all aware that that legislation might be flawed because some people say it has too many loopholes that allow foreign influences to undermine our sovereignty. Others say it grants too much privilege to RAMSI, even to the extent of allowing the Mission to override certain provisions of our Constitution. Five years down the road, and now in times of peace, the roles and functions of RAMSI as provided for under the Act might indeed be outdated and questionable. However, there is no doubt in my mind that the Facilitation Act has enabled RAMSI to rescue Solomon Islands from collapsing into a “black hole”. RAMSI has made a huge difference in the rebuilding of this nation, and it is timely and proper that we as one people take stock of what it has done and what else it should do to ensure this nation has durable peace and security, sustainable law and order regime, increasing prosperity, effective leadership at all levels of society and a competent work force.

We in the West have suffered much from devastating events that we had no hand in fomenting. The consequences of the Bougainville crisis spill over effect and the unnecessary Solomon Islands’ ethnic tension has almost consigned this nation into oblivion. A large number of my people are still reeling from the psychological, social and economic damages inflicted by these traumatic events.

To us the presence of RAMSI and what it has been able to do to bring back normalcy, predictability and integrity to national governance has been much appreciated. My people have great admiration for our leaders who had the vision and resolve to invite RAMSI to come and clean up the mess we created for ourselves. And since RAMSI has been here there has been little we could fault it for.

However, since we are here to talk about various aspects of RAMSI's work, let me be candid in what I see is happening in the day-to-day activities of RAMSI.

Mandate, functions and roles of RAMSI

I understand RAMSI has intervened in our crisis with a mandate to carry out four main tasks: the re-establishment of national security and law and order; the re-strengthening of the justice system; the stabilization of the economy with prudent management of public finance and the improvement of the machinery of government.

All of these tasks have a built-in time element in them. All of them would require long (5 to 10 years) timeframes to reach sustainable levels. It is here, I think, that a clear strategic plan for achieving that sustainable level needs to be produced by Government and RAMSI. If there were to be an exit strategy for RAMSI, then it ought to spell out how those four tasks would be satisfactorily completed in a given time frame.

In the area of security, law and order, we in the West have always favoured a dispersed and decentralised policing regime. In public finance, a locally managed financial system would be preferred; some parts of the justice system would need to be decentralised and Provinces should have their own pool of human resources to build good governance with. In other words, Government and RAMSI should help devise a plan whereby a program relating to the ongoing implementation of the four main tasks could function under the proposed federal system of government.

We must to learn lessons from the fact that it was overcentralisation in everything governance that had resulted in the speedy demise of the country's security system, the rule of law and economic wellbeing of the entire nation. There had been no other parts of the country that were strong enough to provide an alternative base for good governance during those dark days.

So RAMSI should stay within the parameters of the four tasks until it has been able to properly address them under different conditions and contexts.

Operations of RAMSI

There has not been a significant presence of RAMSI in my Province since about 2005. RAMSI has bases in Gizo, ^{Noro,} ^{and in the Shooflands} and Munda, and only intermittent presence in other parts of the Province, and only as and when required.

Unlike in other Provinces, RAMSI has not built any significant infrastructures in the West, and its activities there hardly make headlines. Perhaps if its gun-carrying officers shoot some of the dangerous crocodiles in the nearby mangrove patches, they might get a mention in the newspapers.

But RAMSI continues to be very successful in monitoring illicit trades being carried out in villages by foreign traders who deal in prohibited products. With its rapid response capability on the sea and land, RAMSI has been, many a time, able to get to trouble spots quickly to quell potential conflicts between antagonists. This has happened on several occasions involving logging operations where opposing parties have confronted each other.

Apart from the fact that the presence of RAMSI in the West is comforting to the populace and relationship between them have and continue to be good, RAMSI needs to carry out more awareness programs about its roles at the community level, especially in relation to community policing.

Expectation of RAMSI

RAMSI in the West, in my view, should focus more on the border between Bougainville and Solomon Islands, on illegal activities of loggers, on community policing and on other programs that would strengthen security at the village level.

However, RAMSI should not interfere with traditional leadership and should stay out of politics, especially in regard to Western peoples' aspiration for State government.

RAMSI should also formulate an exit strategy, tying it to the main tasks it has been mandated to do.

Duration of RAMSI's Stay

In regard to RAMSI's stay in the Solomons, 5 to 10 years more should be sufficient depending on the contents of its exit strategy.

Relationship with RSIP

The rebuilding of the police force continues to be one of the core responsibilities of RAMSI. If policing is to remain a highly centralised function, which we in the West believe should not be, then the relationship between RSIP and RAMSI should continue to focus strongly on professionalising the RSIP.

The creation of a highly competent, professional and trustworthy police force is essential if the Force is to regain its credibility and community support. But this is one institution that will require a much longer time frame to attain a satisfactory level of maturity and experience (say another 8 years).

Firearms

In regard to RAMSI personnel carrying firearms in public, there should be a scaling down on it. Guns should be kept nearby in patrol vehicles or canoes as circumstances dictate but they should not be carried openly. I still think, though, that those guns should be used to shoot crocs. These predators are becoming a menace to humans since most licensed guns have been taken away from their owners. Many people have died as food for crocodiles.

Immunities and Privileges of RAMSI

The immunity and privileges accorded to RAMSI personnel as stipulated in the Facilitation of International Assistance Act should be reviewed. The Act must be revised so that national laws and or the Constitution should take precedence.

New Partnership Framework

Coming to the topic of a new partnership framework, I am aware that one country, Japan, has expressed interest in joining the RAMSI arrangement.

If and when the Facilitation Act is amended or a new partnership framework is formulated, other countries with which Solomon Islands has diplomatic relations should be involved. They have and continue to be as much a part of the Solomon experience as RAMSI member states ~~have been~~^{are}. All our development partners should also 'own' the rebuilding of Solomon Islands.

My Province is prepared to receive any briefings on the idea of a new partnership framework.

RAMSI as alternative or parallel government.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, RAMSI should cease to perform certain functions that come under the purview of Solomon Islands sovereign functions.

I thank you once again for inviting me.

Thank you.

Premier Alex Lokopio,
Western Province