

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL

SOLOMON ISLANDS CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION

SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE

1. Introduction

At the request of the Parliamentary Foreign Relations Committee for submission to its inquiry into the Facilitation of International Assistance Notice for Review and Report, the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA) is making this submission on behalf of member churches. The content of this submission have been reviewed and endorsed by Heads of member churches as representing the collective view of the Association on matters raised.

2. Arguments.

- 2.1 The Solomon Islands Christian Association greatly values the work done by the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) to restore law and order and help in rebuilding the governance institutions of the country. SICA views the work of RAMSI as paving the way for the Government and people of Solomon Islands to embark on the critical task of advancing peace and reconciliation and rebuilding the Country.

The primary focus of SICA is on the process of peace and reconciliation amongst parties to the ethnic conflict as well as the country as a whole. While restoring Law and Order and rebuilding governance institutions are very important, long term stability and progress is dependent on genuine peace and reconciliation amongst different groups in Solomon Islands and this is where SICA's focus is on. And in order for genuine Peace and Reconciliation to be achieved focus must be on advancing a process that is owned and driven by communities. Peace and Reconciliation can only be genuine if it is from the heart of individuals and communities. In this regard, the National and Provincial Governments should establish mechanisms and processes that enable individuals and their communities to seek peace and reconciliation. In this regard SICA considers its role in advancing peace and reconciliation as vital. However, under the current arrangement and structure of the regional Assistance Mission the churches are not part of promoting peace and reconciliation at the community level. Churches can play a vital role in promoting peace and reconciliation and this should be recognized by the Government and RAMSI they continue with the national rebuilding process. Under the current arrangement, there is no provision or recognition of the role of churches in rebuilding communities and the nation and this needs to be considered. While the Government represent the collective interest and welfare of the people and communities in the country the only organizations that have operations in all communities are the churches and there are aspects of rebuilding the nation that requires recognition and formal arrangement for partnership with the churches, particularly in the area of peace and reconciliation.

3. Opinions

- 3.1 **Carrying of arms in Public:** While the churches recognized and appreciate that carrying arms in Public is part of the RAMSI arrangement it needs to be managed and perhaps slowly phased out. This is because many people, especially women and children, who were severely traumatized during the ethnic conflict are still affected by the mere sight of guns. Secondly, such practice gives the impression to the people of Solomon Islands that only armed law enforcement would guarantee peace and stability. People must be made to have confidence in the functioning of police and judiciary without the use of arms. Carrying arms in Public will contribute to perpetuating the idea that armed law enforcement is the key to long term peace and stability. SICA views long term peace and stability as dependent of building respect for the rule of law as well as people's confidence in their own ability to resolve issues and enforce laws without having to resort to armed enforcement. Creating confidence in armed law enforcement would create the kind of condition that may see

rearming of the police after RAMSI exits the country and efforts must be made to slowly build confidence amongst people of Solomon Islands that law and order can be administered and enforced without the need for arms.

3.2 Immunity Provision of the Facilitation Act: SICA recognizes that according immunity to armed and police forces participating is such intervention as RAMSI is an internationally accepted practice and also a necessity to allow RAMSI to operate effectively. However, the lack of understanding by the Public of what the immunity entails gives rise to the perception that RAMSI are above the laws of this country. This perception is a rather serious problem because at the heart of the RAMSI goal is restoration of the rule of law and having people perceive the promoter of the rule of law to be not subject to the same national laws results in people and politicians demanding that such immunity be removed. SICA is of the view that if immunity is absolutely essential for RAMSI to function clarity to the Public as to the application of such immunity be addressed. Questions that are often raised in relation to this matter include:

- (a) Why can't RAMSI personnel be subjected to the law of Solomon islands.
- (b) Is immunity only valid when RAMSI personnel are on duty? What happen to cases where RAMSI officers break the laws when off duty, and the case involving a Samoan Police officer is a case in point.
- (c) What would happen if RAMSI officer(s) commit serious crimes outside of their duty?

It is important that the public have a clear understanding of the scope, application, and limits of the immunity provisions. Failure to address this issue would only contribute to strengthen the view that immunity provisions should be eliminated. SICA recognizes that immunity is a critical component to enable armed and police and other RAMSI personnel to operate and carry out their missions. However, the growing perception by the public that RAMSI is talking about respect for the rule of law while not being subjected to national laws is a serious threat to the RAMSI work. It is therefore critical that the parameters and application of the immunity Provisions are clarified to the Public.

3.3 Timeframe for RAMSI Exit: There has been calls for an exit strategy for RAMSI from different quarters. SICA support a properly constituted framework worked out between the Government and people of Solomon Islands and RAMSI as to the duration of RAMSI operating in the country. SICA is of the view that a properly worked out exit strategy is the way forward as it represent the collective will of RAMSI and Solomon Islands to slowly transfer responsibilities to the Government of Solomon islands. SICA does not support calls made for RAMSI to exit that have their foundation on ill will. Rather SICA supports development of an exit strategy and timeline to be a reflection of goodwill between the Government and people of Solomon Islands and RAMSI. It is also important that people of Solomon Islands gain confidence in the ability of the Government to promote, protect, and advance the interest and welfare of its people. Confidence by the people of Solomon Islands in the Government is critical to long term stability. At present the general perception is that governance and other institutions that enable the country to function are only working because RAMSI is in the country. People's confidence in their own Government to deliver services need to be strengthened and getting Government to not become dependent on RAMSI is critical. A case in point is the growing call by the Government for RAMSI to embark on rural development. These are rightly the responsibility of the National and Provincial governments to serve the people of the country.

3.4 Accountability arrangement: The accountability structure of RAMSI operation is not very clear to the average Solomon Islander. It is understood that under accountability arrangement RAMSI reports regularly to the Government on its operations and programme activities. However, the Government has not been very effective in creating wider awareness of such RAMSI reports. This is a major threat to RAMSI as the reason for its success is the acceptance and support from the population.

More efforts need to be made to ensure that RAMSI reports are made available and easy for the public to access. When the Government fails to inform the public in a structured and systematic way then this creates gaps that are then filled by misinformation, fear mongering etc. Public support for RAMSI has been strong consistently but when accountability structure is between the mission and the Government only then the risk of the public being misinformed etc becomes a major issue.

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