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The changing face of the Solomons



The AFP is playing a leading role in one of Australia's largest and most ambitious operations in the region as part of Operation Helpem Fren, aimed at bringing the Solomon Islands back from the brink of social and economic collapse.

The intervention has been welcomed by the majority of the 400,000 people living in the Pacific archipelago to the north-east of Australia, which has been plagued by civil unrest and systemic corruption for five years.

The armed conflict erupted in 1998 between warring factions the Isatabu Freedom Movement of Guadalcanal and the Malaita Eagles Force, which resulted in more than 100 deaths. It escalated in 2000 when the Malaitan militants and elements of the police force broke into the police armouries and took over the capital Honiara, deposing the Government and ousting then Prime Minister Bart Ulafa'alu.

The AFP first answered the call for help three years ago as part of the International Peace Monitoring Team in support of the Townsville Peace Agreement.

While it did help reduce internal conflict, the peace agreement stalled and lawlessness increased.



Many illegal weapons had been destroyed, but thousands of high-powered guns remained in the hands of former militants.

In April this year the current Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza made a personal request to Australian Prime Minister John Howard to supply forces to help bring back order to the country.

“The Solomon Islands Government has recognised that it is unable to address its problems or, indeed, govern effectively - they know that if they do not stop the slide into chaos their nation will collapse,” Prime Minister Howard said in a ministerial statement to Parliament.

Mr Howard stressed the importance of the strong ties between the nations and our ongoing commitment to the region.

“A small group of criminals and militants have been looting the very future of the Solomons. They have terrorised the community and done a grave disservice to the reputation of the Solomon Islanders as a good and generous people,” he said.

“Kidnapping, murder, rape and torture have gone unchecked. Police are unable or unwilling to investigate many of these crimes. There are too many examples of criminals evading arrest, charges or detention, protected by corrupt politicians, officials, police or prison guards.”

The Australian Government agreed to deploy the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

“Our military and policing forces are held in high esteem internationally for their courage and for their professionalism - our nation is rightly proud of them,” Mr Howard said.

Given the name Helpem Fren, which is Pidgin English for Helping Friends, the primary objective of the police and security operation is to work alongside the Royal Solomon Island Police (RSIP) to help restore law and order and return stability to the country.

“One of the highest priorities for the law enforcement operation will be to gain the trust and confidence of the local community and work alongside the RSIP to enhance overall public confidence in policing,” AFP Commissioner Keelty said.

The Participating Police Force (PPF) is a regional effort with support from New Zealand, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Fiji, Cook Islands and Kiribati.

The Australian commitment includes 155 AFP and 85 APS members and 1500 Australian Defence Force personnel.

In all, 2500 troops and police from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Tonga are involved in the operation, the region’s largest deployment since World War II.

Australia’s first contingent of 59 AFP and 15 APS members arrived in Honiara in late July under the



command of Assistant Commissioner Ben McDevitt, who was deputised as the Deputy Commissioner of the Royal Solomon Islands Police and appointed PPF Commander.

Overseeing Operation Helpem Fren is Nick Warner, a senior official from the Department of Foreign Affairs.

As hoped, the arrival of the first wave in Honiara was very low key, the official welcome coming later that afternoon when Mr Warner was flown in to be greeted by Solomon Islands Prime Minister Kemakeza along with tribal dancers and hundreds of onlookers.

AFP members hit the ground running and were walking the beat with their colleagues from the RSIP by the end of the first day, with PPF Commander McDevitt determined to make it a smooth transition.

“People are genuinely happy to see us here,” Commander McDevitt said on the first day.

“There has been an immediate impact on feelings of public safety in the capital of Honiara.”

On a fact-finding visit to gauge progress of the mission after the first full week on the ground, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer was full of praise for the way RAMSI was carrying out its task.

The coming challenges were not lost on Solomon Islands Prime Minister Kemakeza.

“Every day, from the smallest village to the largest town, we will be praying for their safety as they go about their important work. The men and women of Operation Helpem Fren will assist us to return law and order, to recover our economy and restore the lasting peace,” he said.

The first step towards achieving peace was to rid the Solomons of illegal guns. An official 21-day gun amnesty was declared by Prime Minister Kemakeza, RSIP Commissioner Bill Morrell and PPF Commander McDevitt on 21 July.

Some of the weapons handed in included a .50 calibre machine gun with ammunition, military style weapons, home-made guns, explosives and World War II ordnances.

By the end of the amnesty more than 3000 weapons and 300,000 rounds of ammunition had been surrendered and destroyed.

There was a colourful celebration to mark the occasion, with local performers and a peace march attracting a crowd of more than 15,000, who watched the ceremonial destruction of firearms.

“This day belongs to the people of the Solomon Islands who have had the courage to bring forward

those weapons and can now move towards peace and unity,” Commander McDevitt said.

Another milestone was the opening of a provincial police post at Avu Avu, a small village located on the south-eastern end of the Weathercoast of Guadalcanal, accessible only by air or sea, its importance highlighted by Commander McDevitt.

“The opening of the police post at Avu Avu will be an enormous step forward for the community,” he said.

“The people of the Weathercoast have suffered enough at the hands of people armed with guns. As of today they will have a new police post staffed by dedicated, professional police. They are keen and willing to work with the community to help make Avu Avu a safer place to live.”

Other police stations have since been opened at Auki, Maluu and Atori on the island of Malaita, at Kolina and Tari (later moved to Mbanbanakira) along the Weathercoast, at Tuarana to the east of Honiara and at Gizo in the Western Province.

The biggest breakthrough of the first month on the ground was the surrender and arrest of rebel leader Harold Keke and three of his most senior associates on 13 August.

It was the culmination of a series of sensitive meetings between Keke and RAMSI officials and was seen as a crucial development in the mission and

a positive sign that further progress could be made without violence

There had been increased pressure to arrest Keke after he admitted that the six priests taken hostage in April were dead.

Commander McDevitt acknowledged the breakthrough but stressed there was still plenty of work to do.

“The reality here is that the arrest of Harold Keke potentially creates a power vacuum on the Weathercoast. There are a lot of people yet to be spoken to. There are still a lot of weapons left to be collected,” he told ABC radio.

“We are far from resolving all of the troubles and problems of the Solomon Islands, so I would hate for anyone to gain the impression that the arrest of Harold Keke, whilst a significant achievement, amounts to resolution of the problems of the Solomon Islands, because nothing could be further from the truth.”

Keke is now in the custody of the Australian-led intervention force after appearing in a makeshift court on a series of firearms offences and an attempted murder charge.

There have been several other key arrests including that of one of the most senior RSIP policemen, Superintendent James Kili, who has been charged with a series of offences relating to violence and corruption.





Superintendent Kili was second-in-charge of the police force's elite Special Tactics and Rescue (STAR) Division.

With the three-week gun amnesty removing most of the arms from militia and criminal groups, RAMSI's attention has swung towards a full-scale clean-up of the police force.

The efforts were bolstered by the arrival of a team of AFP forensic science experts, highly skilled in fingerprint ballistic examination, crime scene investigations and photographic work.

Working closely with the RSIP in the investigation of crimes, they'll be helping provide scientific evidence to be used in trials, a challenge Forensic Team Leader Inspector Craig Petterd looked forward to.

"I am very excited about the work that we will be doing here," he said.

"I am looking forward to meeting my counterparts in the RSIP so we can share information and experience.

"We will be working closely together in crime scene investigation to ensure we provide the investigators with professional scientific evidence."

There is still much to be done but the Australian presence has already made a huge difference. In just a few weeks Honiara's streets of lawlessness have been transformed. Gone are the drunken mobs and illegal trading stalls; in their place are regular police patrols and people moving freely and confidently about town.

The AFP's role in the Solomons will be ongoing. Once law and order have been restored, efforts will be put into development and training to rebuild the RSIP and helping the people of the Solomon Islands build a better future for themselves and their children.