

Solomon Islands

Presidential elections in 2006, the first since the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) deployed in 2003, sparked the worst violence the archipelago has experienced since the mission's arrival. Rioting in response to the election of the unpopular Snyder Rini in April 2006 was quelled by 400 RAMSI troops. However, this emergency deployment came after the razing of the capital city's Chinatown district, the displacement of thousands, and the resignation of Rini. The mission's failure to anticipate the postelection violence, combined with the subsequent election of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare in May 2006, left RAMSI facing a government that was less accommodating than its predecessor.

In 1998, disputes over land rights on the main island of Guadalcanal led to violence between indigenous residents and settlers hailing from the island of Malaitia—leaving hundreds dead and 20,000 Malaitians displaced. Guadalcanal Liberation Front (GLF) militants, under the direction of Harold Keke, and the opposing Malaitia Eagle Force (MEF), terrorized the government and citizenry in the capital, Honiara. Many of these militants then enlisted in the government's special constables units, using government uniforms for militia activities.

In response, Prime Minister Sir Alan Kemakeza requested support from Australia, and then took the matter to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). After notifying the UN Security Council, the initial RAMSI force of 2,000 Australian-led troops and police was deployed on 24 July 2003. Invited by the Solomon Island parliament, RAMSI's primary objective was to restore stability and assist in the continued

development of governing, rule-of-law, and economic structures.

The RAMSI presence yielded immediate security benefits: GLF and MEF commanders surrendered by August 2003. Furthermore, over 400 officers of the Royal Solomon Island Police (RSIP) (about one-third of the active police service) were fired or pushed to retire, with some being placed on trial. The Participating Police Force (PPF) of RAMSI worked in tandem with the remaining RSIP to strengthen its capabilities and to reestablish the force as a vital national institution. Since 2003, the 258 PPF personnel, alongside the RSIP, have established seventeen police posts in all provinces and have begun training new police recruits at the RSIP police academy in Rove.

Following the quick restoration of peace in its first year of deployment, RAMSI reduced its military troop presence and switched its focus to economic and governance reform. It placed eighteen advisers among the Ministry of Finance to assist the government in addressing corruption and regaining control of revenues and expenditures. RAMSI is mostly an Australian enterprise in personnel and financial resources, and Australians hold several top posts within Solomon Island government, civil service, and financial bodies. This overt presence and influence in state institutions has created friction. Following the instability in April 2006, Prime Minister Sogavare expressed his gratitude for RAMSI's accomplishments, while also promising to review and limit the mission's actions. The tensions between RAMSI and its host reached new heights at the end of the year when Sogavare expelled Australia's



REUTERS/Tim Wimborne

A New Zealand peacekeeper protects a convoy of trucks transporting civilians fleeing the riots of 23 April 2006.

top diplomat for alleged interference in the controversial investigation of the April riots. The prime minister also recommended a restructuring of the mission and threatened to expel it altogether.

The continued rebuilding of the Solomon Islands in the face of a resistant Sogavare government eager to achieve autonomy will pose great challenges for RAMSI in the coming year. The majority of the emergency RAMSI forces that deployed in April have been withdrawn, but Australians maintain a high profile in Solomon Island affairs. The instability in April is indicative of the work still to be done if the country is to fully overcome its history of conflict and poor governance.

Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands (RAMSI)

• Authorization date	23–30 October 2000 (Pacific Islands Forum Communiqué)
• Start date	July 2003
• Head of mission	Timothy George (Australia)
• Budget	\$159.4 million (October 2005–September 2006)
• Strength as of 30 September 2006	Troops: 200 Civilian police: 320 Civilian staff: 180