Increased stability in the Solomon Islands in 2011 has paved the way for greater focus on national capacity development and institutional strengthening. It has also prompted discussion on the eventual drawdown and transition of the Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands (RAMSI). RAMSI underwent a turnover in leadership during 2011, with Special Coordinator Graeme Wilson handing over responsibility to Nicholas Coppel in April and Paul Osborne joining the mission as the new police commander for the Participating Police Force (PPF) in June.

Background

RAMSI was established in 2003 by the Pacific Islands Forum in response to a five-year conflict between the Malatians and the Guale ethnic groups in the Solomon Islands. The conflict had eroded law and order and given way to rampant corruption, intimidation, and violence. The Solomon Island government was unable to function effectively and incapable of delivering basic services. In RAMSI’s earliest days, the mission focused on security and stabilization, contributing to the surrender of armed criminal gangs supported by both the Malatians and the Guale.

The 2007 election of Manasseh Sogavare ushered in a period of tense relations between the Solomon Island government and RAMSI. The Sogavare government openly questioned the intentions of the RAMSI contingent and threatened to oust the mission. A 2007 vote of no confidence and the subsequent election of Derek Sikua helped to strengthen relations and demonstrated the broader support among Solomon Islanders for RAMSI’s work. Elections in 2010 brought former foreign minister Danny Philip to power with a narrow majority.

As security and stability have improved and the Solomon Islands moves further away from crisis, the mission has turned its attention to long-term capacity building and institutional strengthening. The 2009 partnership framework between the Solomon Island government and RAMSI identified three pillars of the mission’s work: law and justice, economic governance and growth, and machinery of government. The framework established the overall goals for RAMSI, with specific targets and timelines for achievement, intended to facilitate a smooth transfer of activities to national actors in tandem with capacity building and institutional strengthening.

Key Developments

In 2011 RAMSI entered into a series of open discussions on its future role in the Solomon Islands and its eventual drawdown. The talks
included community leaders and chiefs, church leaders, students, teachers, and public servants who met to reflect on RAMSI’s past achievements and share views on the future of the mission. During these discussions RAMSI stressed that any transition would occur within the parameters of the partnership framework and would take place in close consultation with the Solomon Island government.

RAMSI is currently funded through 2013, but stakeholders emphasize that any drawdown or withdrawal will occur gradually and that the mission will exist in some form for a number of years to come. RAMSI-contributing countries are already adapting their support in light of increasing stability in the Solomon Islands. Australia, the main contributor to RAMSI, has reduced the size of its contingent, many of whom are currently deployed as reservists. New Zealand has also emphasized the importance of a greater focus on the shift from security to development.

A key precondition for a smooth transition process will be strengthened capacity of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF). RAMSI has therefore given priority to training and mentoring the police, with expectations of long-term support. In addition, RAMSI will increasingly focus on handing over policing tasks to the RSIPF. In this vein,
it is envisioned that over the next two years RAMSI will gradually withdraw from the thirteen police posts where it maintains a presence in order to allow the RSIPF to take a leadership role. This transition began in August 2011 in Buala, Isabel province, where RAMSI PPF officers began to gradually scale down their operational presence and dedicate greater attention to mentoring. This was followed by a handover in October in Isuna, where the RSIPF, in response, pledged to increase its own policing services.

The transition is also predicated on the expanded presence of police officers throughout the Solomon Islands. To facilitate officer relocation and ensure that they have adequate housing in their new stations, in 2011 RAMSI initiated a project, funded by Australia and New Zealand, to build police houses throughout the country. RAMSI’s Special Coordinator noted that the housing project plays an important role in police recruitment, heightening the image of the RSIPF as an “employer of choice.”

The 2010 edition of the independent annual People’s Survey, released in April 2011, showed continued support for RAMSI’s work in the Solomon Islands, with 84 percent of respondents supporting the mission as a whole and 76 percent supporting the military component. The results also revealed continued concern about a return to conflict, with nearly half of respondents believing that law and order would break down if RAMSI were to depart immediately. In addition, 40 percent of respondents said they trusted the police, with 28 percent dissenting. These results underscore wide support for a continued role for RAMSI, particularly in the context of handover of policing responsibilities to national authorities.

Conclusion
As RAMSI moves forward with its assistance through the three pillars of the partnership framework, continued close consultation with the Solomon Island government will be critical. This is particularly important as discussions increasingly focus on transition and RAMSI’s future role in the Solomon Islands.

Notes