

Solomon Islands government calls for RAMSI exit plan

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The Solomon Islands government wants the Pacific Islands Forum to initiate talks on an exit plan for the PIF's Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), Solomons foreign minister Patterson Oti told a PIF consultative meeting in Honiara on February 12.

"I'm not saying RAMSI should leave tomorrow or soon, but at least we work towards a timeframe so that Solomon Islanders do not become dependent on RAMSI", Oti said.

Three days earlier, Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer made an extraordinary intervention into the Solomons' internal affairs by taking out paid advertisements in three Honiara newspapers calling on the country's citizens to oppose their government's attempts to "undermine" RAMSI. Downer's full-page ads claimed that any weakening of RAMSI would throw the Solomons into the hands of "thugs and criminals".

Solomons PM Manasseh Sogavare told the parliament of the impoverished archipelago nation of 500,000 people that Downer's open letter had breached internationally accepted diplomatic protocol and was proof Canberra was using RAMSI to try to run a parallel government in the Solomons.

At a press conference on February 13, Papua New Guinea foreign secretary Gabriel Pepson, who chaired the PIF consultative meeting, said that Oti's call for a RAMSI exit plan would be considered as part of the PIF's review of RAMSI agreed to at Sogavare's request by last October's annual PIF leaders' summit.

While formally a joint initiative of the 16-country PIF, RAMSI is dominated by Australian government personnel. Through RAMSI, the Solomons police force is run by Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers, the Solomons courts system is run by Australian legal officers and magistrates, and key Solomons government departments are run by Australian government "advisers".

RAMSI was set up at the end of June 2003 at Canberra's initiative. The blueprint for RAMSI was set out in a June 10, 2003, document issued by the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute. Called *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of the Solomon Islands*, the document proposed the formation of a colonial-style "Solomon Islands Rehabilitation Authority", staffed predominantly by Australian officials, which would take over the Solomons police force and key government departments.

The ASPI document argued that the breakdown of "law and order" in the Solomons was "depriving Australia of business and investment opportunities that, though not huge, are potentially valuable".

This breakdown occurred in 1998 in the wake of the 1997 Asian "financial crisis", which caused a halt in exports of hardwood logs from the Solomons. These exports had provided 60% of government revenues.

Under strong pressure from Canberra, the government of then-PM Bartholomew Ulufualu began to drastically reduce public sector services and jobs. The consequent rise in poverty and youth

unemployment in Honiara led to widespread petty gangsterism.

Canberra, however, publicly justified the RAMSI intervention, initially involving the deployment of 2200 troops and armed police, as necessary to prevent the Solomons from becoming a “haven for terrorists”.

On February 14, Oti told the Solomons parliament that a formal request had been lodged with Canberra for a face-to-face meeting between Sogavare and Australian PM John Howard, adding: “We anticipate mending this relationship on the basis of mutual understanding and respect for each other’s sovereignty.”

Relations between Canberra and Honiara have deteriorated since Sogavare was elected Solomons PM last May. He immediately said that RAMSI had undermined the Solomons’ sovereignty and called for a RAMSI exit plan.

Open diplomatic war between Canberra and Honiara erupted on September 12 when Sogavare ordered the expulsion of Australian ambassador Patrick Cole. In a parliamentary speech defending Cole’s expulsion, Sogavare said that previous Solomons’ governments had wrongly given “full authority to run this country to foreign governments who hide behind the guise of having concern for the welfare of Solomon Islanders when in fact they were really concerned about their own strategic interests”.

Five months earlier, the Sydney Morning Herald had revealed that following the Solomons’ April 5 general elections, Cole had held private discussions with politically influential Solomons business tycoon Sir Thomas Chan to get the parliament to re-elect a pro-RAMSI government.

In the following months, Cole had publicly campaigned against the Sogavare government’s plan to have an independent judicial inquiry into the causes of riots that swept Honiara on April 18. The riots followed the AFP’s tear-gassing of a peaceful protest rally against the parliament’s election of Chan favourite Snyder Rini as PM.

Canberra denounced Cole’s expulsion and began a campaign to bring down Sogavare’s government. Since the end of September, the AFP has unsuccessfully attempted to have Fiji-born Australian lawyer Julian Moti, Sogavare’s attorney-general, extradicted to Australia to again face charges of having had sex with a 13-year-old girl in Vanuatu in 1997 — charges that were dismissed in 1999 by the Vanuatu Court of Appeals.

Using the Moti affair, Canberra-backed Solomons opposition leader Fred Fono moved a non-confidence motion against Sogavare on October 11. The motion was only able to garner the support of 17 of the country’s 50 MPs.

P.S.

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