

Operation in progress

Peter Davis examines progress on the road to peace in the Solomon Islands

THE GUNS HAVE BEEN SILENCED. And most of the thugs and corrupt officials are behind bars awaiting trial. So where to from here for *Operation Helpen Fren* on the Solomon Islands?

'Before I used to be scared that the police would stop me, steal my car and leave me', said Linus, a taxi driver in Honiara. 'Now life is better. People are walking the streets and going to the market, but there is a long way to go. People need jobs so they can make money and use my taxi.'

As a barometer of the current situation, Linus is on the money. His claim that improvements are good but have a long way to go echoes like a mantra across the islands. As if on cue, Linus points out the Rove Prison, a new jail built as part of the Australian aid program. 'There are many policemen in that prison' he says, referring to inmates not guards. 'With them out of the way we can get on with our lives.'

Two of the 216 prisoners in Rove are former deputy police commissioners of the Solomon Islands. 'We treat them just the same as everybody else', says Gary Walsh, the Australian commander of Rove Prison. At lunchtime, low security prisoners prepare and cart the food to those behind the high security razor wire. From one corner of the jail came yells of abuse and protest. This was soon drowned out by some harmonious gospel singing from another corner. 'We encourage the singing', explained Walsh. 'Soon after they start, the whole prison settles down.'

Walsh is one of nearly 100 Australian civilians employed through AusAID, the Australian government aid agency. Mostly

they work alongside Solomon Islanders in all sectors of society including health, finance, justice, government, police, education, forestry and disaster management. 'We're in the nation building phase now', says Nick Warner, Special Coordinator of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI). 'We've scaled back the role of the military and we're emphasising economic reform. This country needs investment if it is to have a future but to make that happen we need to strengthen capacity in all sectors'.

Complex laws governing land ownership are a significant obstacle to investment. Eighty per cent of the land is custom land, meaning it belongs to various tribal communities. 'Much of the ethnic tension began with land disputes. If you can't agree on who owns what land, the investors will stay away' says Steve Likaveka, acting Commissioner of Lands and a Seventh Day Adventist pastor. The AusAID funded Customary Land Awareness Program is an attempt to generate security of title among traditional owners. Through the program traditional land owners are encouraged to document the extent of their holdings and identify their boundaries. 'Stability comes once the boundaries are mapped and agreed upon', explains Rod Little, Australian Team Leader of the Lands Project. The project has put into place a system where potential investors and traditional owners must communicate through officials at the lands department rather than directly with one another. 'This may sound like we've created a new bureaucracy but in

fact it ensures the owners and investors reach agreement.'

To help traditional owners feel comfortable about walking into an office of bureaucrats, the area in front of the office in Honiara has been landscaped to resemble the meeting place in a traditional village. 'This may seem a small thing but it's significant as far as signalling the idea that the land project exists to help, not to hinder, the traditional owners', says Rod.

Land generates 80 per cent of export income for the Solomon Islands, through forestry. Most of the logging is done by overseas companies from Malaysia or Taiwan. During the conflict, logging companies enjoyed a free reign. Many operated illegally in collaboration with corrupt local officials and few paid taxes. 'With stability we can implement appropriate policies', says Dan Raymond, a forestry Project Advisor. 'The challenge is to introduce sustainable logging practices, acceptable safety standards and appropriate returns for the local land owners.'

One prominent logging company recently had its license suspended because it failed to meet environmental standards. According to Dan Raymond, such actions were simply not possible during the troubles.

IT'S HARD TO OVERESTIMATE the value of the Solomon Island teak forests, not just to foreign companies but to local citizens as well. In the tropical island climate a teak seedling will be ready to harvest after just ten years. Dan Raymond cites the example of a widow who desperately



needed financial security so she could educate her children. 'She had the foresight to plant ten teak trees on her property. Those trees are her financial future. There are many people like her who, in a politically stable environment can live off what the land generates. If the forests can be properly managed and the companies made to comply with environmentally friendly legislation, so many more people will be able to benefit from these vast resources'. Timber worker Joseph Loku is happy to be back at work in the logging co-op. 'When the troubles became very bad the companies employed the criminals. For many months we had no work and no pay. It was very hard, but now I can feel the change. This is good.'

There are many parts of Honiara where change is evident. In particular there's the Magistrates Court, the Central Police Station, the Department of Finance, and the Lime Lounge—a coffee shop in the heart of the small capital.

Over at Number One Court, Principal Magistrate, Queensland lawyer, Jane White, hears cases and dispenses justice. Most convictions are for domestic violence, theft or corruption. By 9am the viewing areas and adjacent courtyards are packed. 'This is the only show in town' said Jane, one of the few people to refer to the 'troubled times' as civil war. 'During the civil war, law and order broke down. Many of the local magistrates simply ran away and buildings were destroyed. Now people want to watch the law being administered. It gives them a sense of security to know that order has returned'.

Nearby are the offices of the Public Prosecution as well as Legal Aid. It's here that Chris Ryan, a Crown Prosecutor in Victoria, works as Chief Prosecutor on an AusAID funded law and justice program. 'We have successfully charged many people with corruption, including at least a dozen police officers. We have a mountain of cases pending and we expect many more charges to be laid'. In the next building

Kirsty Ruddock provides legal assistance to one of nearly two hundred police officers seeking compensation for unfair dismissal. 'There's enough work here for an army of lawyers but there are only five of us', she said.

OVER AT THE CENTRAL POLICE Station, officers Mahlo Laha and Dave Campbell return from night patrol to file a report. 'It was a quiet night', reports Mahlo, 'One case of drunk and disorderly and one case of a stolen laptop computer'. By early morning the police station is buzzing with partnered teams divvying up the patrols. Solomon Islanders pair off with Tongans, Fijians, New Zealanders, Samoans or Australians. As well as this, there's the plain clothes internal investigation team whose job is to investigate corrupt officers and press charges. 'We wish we weren't so busy. We aim to do ourselves out of a job', said Leslie, one of the investigators. To the visitor, the police on duty represent the visible face of regional assistance. Not so visible is the labyrinthine task of the bureaucrats in the Department of Finance. 'This place looked like a bomb had hit it when we arrived', said Colin Johnson, leader of the Budget Stabilisation Team. 'Because this was the Ministry of Finance thugs would come here with guns and demand money. Most of the workers fled to their villages, and no money was flowing to the government.'

The task of Johnson and his team is to reverse that situation. 'The best thing we've achieved is being able to stop the bad guys from getting their hands on the money', says a plain talking Colin. 'The workers here feel safe now and the revenues are beginning to flow in the right direction.'

There's revenue and coffee flowing at the Lime Lounge. This is the popular hangout for the advisers, police officers, military personnel, aid workers and journalists. A partner in the Lime Lounge is Turkish born, Melburnian Derya Sato

(a former Australian Volunteer and now married to a Japanese born Solomon Islander). 'There's no way I would have opened a place like this if I didn't think the long term prospects were good', she said. 'I employ only local staff and I've trained them all. There was no coffee culture here before the Lime Lounge started.'

The Lime Lounge staff can look forward to some long term employment. The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands is set to continue until 2008 but quite probably for some years beyond that. No one is foolish enough to believe that independent sustainability is around the corner. In areas such as health and education massive resources are needed to eradicate preventable diseases and create even basic opportunities.

On the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, I attended a reconciliation meeting organised by the National Peace Council. Approximately 200 people from surrounding villages sat in the shade of the trees in front of the rural health clinic. Most came to listen. Some came to talk. 'Meetings like this are important', explained John Lily, a pastor from Ngalido village. 'There are many changes happening in our country now and they are for the better. But these changes will be no good if the people don't talk about what has happened in the past. Many bad things have happened. Families have been fighting. People have been killed and children have suffered. We need to face this and agree on how to go forward. If we don't do that, we risk making more mistakes'.

For *Operation Helpen Fren* the way forward means minimising the influence of the *wontok* system in government and in the private sector. *Wontok* is a uniquely Melanesian system of expressing obligations and extending favours through kinships. Whilst this very system has helped communities survive during times of natural disaster such as cyclones, it can inhibit the economic prosperity that a free market is meant to bring. John Lily believes the two systems can co-exist. 'That is our future', he said. 'We must not lose our cultural identity and our customs. But we must embrace these changes so that everyone has a chance for prosperity.'

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