



WMRC Article

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Multinational Intervention
Force to Arrive in Embattled
Solomon Islands Tomorrow

Asia Regional: Multinational Intervention Force to Arrive in Embattled Solomon Islands Tomorrow

The Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands has fled the capital Honiara, with the Australian-led multinational intervention force tasked with bringing stability to the lawless country due to arrive on 24 July.

WMRC Perspective	
Significance	Over the last four years, the Solomon Islands have been gripped by internal strife, ethnic violence and intimidation. The country has been plunged into near-bankruptcy as its public institutions have virtually abdicated control.
Implications	The country is in danger of complete collapse, which could make it a haven for organised crime or terror groups looking for a base in the area. Some of the country's fragile neighbours are also at risk because of the Islands' deterioration, creating a risk to regional stability.
Outlook	WMRC believes the Australian-led intervention force will quickly sweep up the violent forces creating the unrest, with the exception of a small number of the most extreme individuals, who will remain in hiding until they can escape. However, it will take up to 10 years to effect the reconstruction that the country needs, to bring it back from the brink of economic devastation.

'Into the Heart of Darkness'

Plunged into lawlessness, strife, and poverty, the Solomon Islands - population 500,000 - is awaiting the assistance of an international force that will attempt to restore order. In the past three years, the Solomons' economy has shrunk by 25% and almost all of its major industries have closed down. Now the government is finding it almost impossible to provide even the most basic health and education services. How did this happen? Isolated ethnic violence and unrest began in 1998, when Harold Keke, a former policeman, organised a small, dedicated group of indigenous Guadalcanalese to carry out attacks against migrant Malaitans, following a dispute over land rights around the capital, Honiara. The conflict spread to much of the rest of the country, following a coup attempt in 2000 that killed hundreds and displaced 30,000. Catholic Archbishop of Honiara Adrian Smith said at a National Unity Summit in June 2003: 'Could it be that the strength of our tribalism is a breeding ground for the ugly face of corruption which is so visible in our society?'

- The Face of Evil:** As the leader of the Guadalcanal Liberation Front, Keke refused to sign the Australian-brokered peace agreement, and has laid siege to defenceless villages around the Solomons ever since. Keke is the most feared man in the Solomon Islands, having even killed Father Augustine Geve - a government minister - during August 2002. A mythical figure among the islands, few people have ever seen Keke. Even the police are afraid to travel to his stronghold in the mountainous jungle on Guadalcanal's remote weather coast, from where he leads his followers on a campaign of murder and hostage-taking. Keke has even declared 'Harold Keke Days', during which villagers are not permitted to work, but must instead contemplate Keke's greatness, or suffer his wrath. The death toll he has personally inflicted is said to run into several dozen, including three young boys who were beheaded on 13 July. He is also said to have been responsible for rapes and the destruction of villages, resulting in the displacement of over 1,000 people
- The Devastation of Institutions:** Following the atrocities of Keke and other self-styled warlords, poverty, economic stagnation, and corruption have taken hold of the Solomons. GDP has crashed by 25-30% over the three years leading up to 2002, with debt soaring. The judicial system is a paper tiger, and the citizenry has lost faith in government institutions, fuelled in part by the complicity of a large number of the police. The country now ranks 147th on the United Nations' Human Development Index; the ranking would probably be even lower, but officials are not able to collect updated information because it is too unsafe to travel to the country.

Solomon Islands Statistics

Indicator	1997	2000	2001
Population	386,000	419,000	430,000
GNI per capita	US\$860	US\$640	US\$590
GDP	US\$365m	US\$277	US\$264
GDP growth (annual %)	-2.4	-11.0	-9.0
FDI inflows	US\$33.8m	US\$1.4m	-US\$5.1m
Present value of debt	0.0	US\$99m	US\$147m
Main industries	agriculture, fishing, mining, forestry		
Main export destination	Japan (22%)		
Main source of imports	Australia (27%)		

Sources: World Development Indicators Database 2003, World Bank Group; CIA World Fact Book

- **'Conceived, not born':** The Solomon Islands, an archipelago stretching 2000 km, is home to a collection of disparate islands believed to have been inhabited since 2000 BC. Following some of the bloodiest battles in the South Pacific during World War II, the islands were bound together by colonial ambition in 1945 when they were ceded to Great Britain from Japan (although they had already been considered a British Protectorate since the 1890s). The Solomon Islands were granted their independence - within the British Commonwealth - in 1978. The then Governor-General, Sir Baddeley Devesi, quipped that the empire was leaving behind a system of British justice and Parliament, but for an island nation with 4 volcanoes and 70 languages. Recently interviewed, Sir Baddeley blamed the current unrest on the lack of British preparation for the hand-over to autonomy, which has been exacerbated by the unresolved grievances between the Guadalcanalese and Malaitans.

Warlords, Thugs and Bandits: Beware

The Solomon Islands Prime Minister, Sir Allan Kemakeza, today fled the capital of Honiara for security reasons - one day before a multinational intervention force, led by Australia, is poised to descend upon the embattled Islands, to restore law and order. Australia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, has characterised the intervention as a 'police action' supported by soldiers. 2,000 personnel from Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji are expected to arrive in the Solomons on 24 July. The multinational force is intervening at the behest of the Solomon Islands Prime Minister, Allan Kemakeza, and with the approval of the Parliament, which voted unanimously on 18 July to legally authorise the foreign police and military forces to operate in the country. Australia and New Zealand created the framework for intervention, and obtained the unanimous support of the 16-member countries of the Pacific Islands Forum* during a special meeting held on 1 July 2003 in Brisbane, Australia. The flight of the Prime Minister - immediately prior to the arrival of the force - means that the situation is becoming more tense in the country, making it more likely that the military and police conducting the intervention will encounter armed resistance.

* Pacific Islands Forum: Australia, the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, the Fiji Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu

The Comprehensive Package of Strengthened Assistance to Solomon Islands

- **Personnel:** Police forces will restore law and order while being supported by the more substantial firepower from the Australian and New Zealand soldiers. Meanwhile, civil and government affairs experts, primarily from Australia, will assume key positions in government in order to begin the long process of fundamental structural reforms. A senior magistrate from Australia will also be appointed to adjudicate allegations against Solomon Island police and government officials.
 - 200 soldiers from Australia and New Zealand, supported by a naval hospital ship and command centre, helicopters, and smaller patrol boats;
 - 1800 support and logistics staff;
 - 400 police from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, and Papua New Guinea (Samoa still considering

sending personnel);

- An Australian will assume the role of Deputy Police Commissioner; and
 - 100 civilian administrators from Australia - 20 in financial agencies, 20 in general public services, 50 in the prison sector, and 10 in central administration.
- **Mandate:** Under a unique distinction called a 'co-operative intervention', the international intervention force has a virtually unprecedented mandate and broad authority to enter the country and take control of public safety and key institutions. Although the United Nations Security Council was not officially consulted, the UN has given its unofficial endorsement to the action. The 16-member nation Pacific Islands Forum unanimously approved armed, multilateral intervention, followed by new legislation - requesting assistance - which passed by the Islands' Parliament. The legislation includes a key provision allowing for the use of 'lethal force' by the international contingent in their effort to restore security and stability in the country. It also calls for a 30-day amnesty, during which certain illegal militants can turn in their weapons without fear of punishment.
- **Aid Package:** In addition to the police and military forces - with an estimated price tag of A\$300m (US\$196m) - the Solomons will receive a package of international financial assistance. Australia is proposing a ten-year plan of roughly A\$50m (US\$32m) per year and New Zealand may increase its current allocation of NZ\$8m (US\$4.6m) per year to NZ\$20m (US\$11.5m).

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer expects the military portion of the intervention to last between 3-4 months, while the police forces are expected to remain for much longer, and the civilian personnel in key positions longer still. No official estimates have been given, but the Australian Centre for Strategic and International Studies is predicting that a 10-year commitment will be required to bring lasting stability to the Solomon Islands.

Solomon Islands Crisis Timeline

5 June 2000	Hostility between rival ethnic groups leads to a coup
15 October 2000	Townsville Peace Agreement signed; only rebel leader Harold Keke refuses to sign
March 2002	Australian-led peacekeepers withdraw due to deteriorating conditions
May-June 2003	Keke goes on 'killing spree' including the beheading of a prominent Australian missionary
25 June 2003	Australia and New Zealand announce plans to send intervention force
30 June 2003	All 16 member nations of the Pacific Islands Forum agree to support intervention by a multinational force
6 July 2003	Solomons Prime Minister Sir Allan Kemakeza officially requests international intervention
7 July 2003	Keke offer of a 'ceasefire' is rejected; Australia urges him to surrender or be 'hunted'
10 July 2003	Advance force of Australian and New Zealand troops arrive in capital of Honiara
18 July 2003	Solomon Islands' Parliament approves bill to allow multinational force to operate in the islands
23 July 2003	Solomon Islands' Prime Minister Sir Allan Kemakeza flees the capital Honiara, amid fears that his security is in jeopardy
24 July 2003	Expected arrival of the bulk of the 2,000-member multinational force

Outlook and Implications

This intervention into the Solomon Islands will have obvious implications for the country, but will also raise interesting questions for the Pacific region and the increasingly important role of Australia.

- **The Solomon Islands:** The Australian-led force will be a formidable one, and will likely compel most of the militant elements to give up rather than fight. However, the more extreme criminals - such as those led by Harold Keke, who are facing legal retribution whether they surrender or not - will put up a fight because at this point they have nothing to lose. Once the police and military forces have been able to root out the most dangerous elements and bring some stability back to the country, the real work of reconstruction will begin. Current members of the domestic police force, public officials, and elected leaders complicit in the downward spiral of the country will eventually be brought to justice, although some will be granted immunity under a deal made with Australia before the Islands' Parliament passed the intervention legislation. Once a sense of security has been restored, political upheaval is likely to follow, as the people demand accountability from elected leaders who were not able - or did not try - to prevent the implosion of the country.

- **Pacific Region:** The intervention into the Solomon Islands is as much about ensuring regional stability as it is about bringing order to the embattled country. In the last 7 years alone, there have been a number of troubling upheavals in several countries in the area, such as the bloody violence in East Timor while voting on independence, the ongoing ethnic clashes in Papua New Guinea and Bougainville, and the coups in Fiji. As instability erupts in some of these seemingly isolated and insular island nations, there are implications for those around them, including a sense of wider instability that could spill over to other countries in the region. For example, there are fears that someone like Harold Keke could rekindle violent land disputes in Papua New Guinea. The 'co-operative intervention' plan led by Australia is an important step in a possible trend for more regional co-operation, and a sense of taking ownership for the region as a whole.
- **Australia:** The government of Prime Minister John Howard has shown an unprecedented commitment toward proactive engagement in the sticky affairs of the region. The most recent major foray was the Australian commitment to bringing peace and stability to East Timor, following the vote for independence from Indonesia. Prior to that, Australian peacekeepers were sent into Papua New Guinea after widespread unrest and violence in Bougainville. Now Australia is leading an ambitious effort to restore stability to the Solomons. Following the Bali bombing in November 2002, Australia will proactively intervene in places that could eventually pose a threat to Australian and regional security. Prime Minister Howard, for example, stated that one of the reasons to address the collapse of the Solomons was to prevent the country from becoming a 'failed state', and a potential regional outpost for an organisation such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) or al-Qaida, from which they could train new recruits and launch attacks in the region.

Although the Australian role in the Solomon Islands intervention may be welcomed by some, it is raising the concerns of others who fear that it may represent a form of neo-colonialism, fuelled by the Howard government's close ties to the US and President George W Bush. Rumours abound that Australia is considering a proposal for the US to construct a massive naval and air base in northern Australia, as part of the US military's global re-deployment. Australia's close ties with the US gives the former an added sense of confidence for more aggressive action in the region. As Bush talks of the 'Axis of Evil', comprising Iraq, Iran and North Korea, Australia raises concerns over the 'Arc of Instability' - an area stretching from Aceh in Indonesia's far west, to East Timor, the Moluccas, West Papua, Papua New Guinea, Bougainville, Fiji, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and the Solomons. Although Australia may never be a major world power in military or economic terms, the country's level of influence has been increased measurably by its close ties with the US, and its willingness to use force in places that have deteriorated into a morass of violence and lawlessness.

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