

Interviews from Honiara

Solomon Islanders hostile to Australian ‘bullying’

A correspondent
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The following report was sent to the WSWS by a Solomon Islands correspondent, who conducted extensive interviews with local residents about last month’s eruption of demonstrations, rioting and looting in the country’s capital, Honiara, and the dispatch of more than 400 Australian-led troops and police to quell the unrest. Many of the interviews were with people from the “settlement areas”—the sprawling squatter camps around Honiara.

The interviews show that the political and social discontent runs far deeper than opposition to Snyder Rini’s election as prime minister by members of parliament on April 18. Rini’s installation made a mockery of an April 5 general election that ousted the previous, notoriously corrupt, Australian-backed government of Sir Allan Kemakeza, in which Rini had served as deputy prime minister. Those interviewed gave voice to underlying disaffection with the 2003 Australian takeover of the country via the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

Some of the interviews point to distrust of Manasseh Sogavare, whom MPs elected to replace Rini. Sogavare has sought to head off the growing anti-RAMSI feeling by calling on Canberra to produce an “exit strategy” for the occupation force. He also accused Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer of “a serious act of interference with the domestic affairs of Solomon Islands” for criticising Sogavare’s appointment of two jailed MPs as cabinet ministers. At the same time, Sogavare, who is due to meet Downer this month, has told Australian television that his government is “not anti-RAMSI” and that “RAMSI is doing a good work in this country”.

Following the riots in April 18, there was a clear anti-RAMSI sentiment, especially in the settlement areas. I interviewed a total of 332 people, and found there was discontent towards RAMSI among most of the interviewees, particularly the unemployed youth.

While some people wanted RAMSI to stay on to maintain law and order, most interviewees were sceptical about the intervention’s interference in the country’s politics and other affairs. Young people questioned many of RAMSI’s actions, some pointing out that its only purpose in taking up important posts inside the government was to direct where the country should go.

Caroline, 24, a tertiary student, said: “RAMSI is a mask for the Australian government’s interest. I hope Sogavare doesn’t

become their puppet.” Ellah, 22, a shopkeeper, said: “Australia still insists that we want them; even the people in my village are getting angry with RAMSI for their big boy ways.” Roselyn, 16, a student, commented: “I believe the Australian government is trying to take over our country.”

The majority of the people who were asked questions relating to RAMSI’s work said that they weren’t satisfied with the current situation. Most said RAMSI had “failed miserably” to tackle the problems faced during the two days of rioting in April.

Young people had a range of comments on the arrival of RAMSI’s reinforcements. A small number commended some of the Australians and Pacific Islanders working under RAMSI for restoring peace. Others, however, said the recovery of looted properties was achieved by local police, with RAMSI officers “standing in the background”. Most of the ensuing raids on people’s homes were carried out without search warrants, and were simply “barge-in acts”. One young man, aged 19, said that after the riots and searches, RAMSI was “dependent on their guns and tear gas”.

Several young people said RAMSI was only concerned with dominating the politics of the country. They questioned RAMSI’s security protection for former Prime Minister Sir Allan Kemakeza. Some noted that the Australian government was interfering too much, after hearing Canberra’s foreign minister Alexander Downer criticising Sogavare’s government.

Most of the young men, especially the unemployed, said they found it easier to openly swear at or abuse RAMSI officers. This disrespect mainly came from the feeling that RAMSI was not really “helping” them. Many were sarcastic about the Howard government’s “helpem fren” (“helping friend”) slogan.

As these comments show, people are not as enthusiastic at the sight of RAMSI officers as they were during the first year of intervention in 2003. At that time, they waved and cheered them on. Nowadays, it’s just a silent stare-back. The youth are usually cynical toward the officers, and sometimes use offensive language against them.

When I asked about social conditions since RAMSI’s arrival in 2003, most people complained that living standards were still the same. Some had lost jobs, especially from government departments, where they had been replaced by a few RAMSI advisors.

From the interviews, it is clear that there is a gap between the rich and the poor. Although poverty is not clearly visible, people are feeling the effects of it. There were comments on not being able to afford food sometimes, and other essentials such as school fees.

Freddrick, 49, a bus driver, commented: “I thought RAMSI would bring in more money when they came in, but I think I am wrong about that.” Kasi, 56, a marketseller, said: “I think RAMSI should work under our government. At the moment they are rich. My sister-in-law works in finance but she hasn’t got a lot of money like her RAMSI workmates.” John, 21, unemployed, said: “We might as well sell our land to Australia.”

Other people commented that they were frustrated that while they bought \$10SBD (\$US1.40) fish-and-chips from Chinese shops, the RAMSI officers got to eat in very expensive food places.

After the interviews, I’ve found that most households (some housing 10 people or more) are living on as little as \$25SBD (\$US3.50) a day, which is spent on their basics. It covers one small can of food or fish, one packet of noodles, one roll of toilet paper, one packet of rice, and one cake of bath soap. It is unusual for settlement people to eat “fresh meat,” such as chicken, every day. It is considered a luxury. Others living in upper class areas would be living on \$100SBD a day.

Most of the people interviewed said jobs with decent pay were far from reach. Some said the biggest wage they could earn was about \$300SBD (\$US42) a week. They included teachers, shopkeepers, taxicab and bus drivers, market-sellers, cleaners and housekeepers. Most said they wished things in shops were much cheaper. Some blamed RAMSI, saying prices had skyrocketed since 2003.

There are no hard-core criminals roaming the streets of Honiara. But the settlements are becoming a breeding ground for petty crime, because many young people are unemployed, some of whom have had no formal education. Out of the 156 youth I interviewed, 5 were tertiary students, 14 secondary students and 18 primary students. At least 87 were “push-outs” or students who “failed” to get any higher education since December 2003. Most said that they could not afford to go to school, and some just enjoyed roaming around.

Other people commented that most of RAMSI’s focus had turned to “business” and money. One man said that while he was visiting Malaita province, he found RAMSI police officers buying gemstones from locals for \$200. The officers told the people that if they sold the stones overseas for “thousands of dollars” they would give a share back to the people, which of course did not happen.

Among people living in settlement areas, most women wanted RAMSI to stay to ensure “law and order”. One said she was scared that as soon as RAMSI officers left, the guns and criminals would return. Men were more worried about the “jobs” aspect. About 70 percent of the men were pessimistic about RAMSI, saying that it had taken over most the jobs in the government and juridical sectors.

Most of the people interviewed were happy that Prime Minister Sogavare’s government was planning on proposing a timeline for

RAMSI to leave the country. They hoped that RAMSI officials would then “put their act together” to do what was needed, rather than “wasting time, holidaying”. They expressed hostility to the previous government of Prime Minister Kemakeza and his deputy, Rini, which had agreed to the RAMSI intervention in 2003.

One young person remarked: “We can vote for our own government—we don’t need RAMSI to tell us what to do. Having Sogavare as prime minister shows that people don’t want the government that brought RAMSI in. I believe it was pressure from the people that led to the changes made in the government during April. At least we took Australia’s puppets out.”

James, 36, unemployed, said: “I don’t like Howard. I don’t like Downer. I’d say they are bullies. If they don’t like Sogavare’s stand, then they should just mind their own business.” Ramson, 47, a teacher, commented: “RAMSI is not an intervention, it’s an interference. And the Honorable John Howard is the head of that interference.” Francis, 19, a student, said: “At first I thought Australia was helping us. So much for ‘helpem fren’. They should just say ‘bulliem fren’.

When I spoke to some of Sogavare’s supporters, they said they had been “very disappointed” when he switched camps to Rini’s side, initially giving Rini the numbers to win the prime ministerial ballot on April 18. They had been in the group that peacefully demonstrated outside parliament that day, wanting to hand in a petition calling for Rini’s resignation.

Altogether, of those interviewed, 14 were happy with the way things were, while 56 wanted RAMSI out of the country. A greater number—89—were concerned that RAMSI was “taking over” government institutions and judicial jobs, and 67 said they were suspicious that the Australian government’s interests were in investment opportunities.

Asked, “are you satisfied with the law and order situation with RAMSI’s presence?” 75 said yes, whereas 257 said no. Overall, 104 people commented that the government needed to take more control over RAMSI, and 87 said RAMSI should only concentrate on law and order.



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