

# Solomon Islands: PM accuses Australia of bullying tactics

Tuesday 30 May 2006, by [LORIMER Doug](#) (Date first published: 31 May 2006).

On May 21, newly elected Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare accused Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer of bullying tactics over the future of the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

Set up three years ago, RAMSI runs the Solomons' legal system, its police force and key government departments, such as the finance ministry. There are also 400 Australian troops and 350 Australian Federal Police deployed under RAMSI's command.

Since his election on May 4 as PM of the impoverished archipelago-nation of 552,000 people, Sogavare has indicated he wants to see RAMSI officials replaced by Solomon Islanders in key government posts.

"Australia seemed to have used the provisions of the current partnership as a licence to infiltrate almost all sectors of the public sector", Sogavare told Solomons radio listeners on May 8. "By their high-level engagement in senior posts within the government we have a situation where foreign nationals have direct and unrestricted access to the nerve centre of Solomon Islands public administration, security and leadership. This is an unhealthy situation."

Downer and New Zealand foreign minister Winston Peters visited Honiara, the Solomons capital, on May 19-20. During a discussion with Sogavare on May 19, Downer rejected any moves to have RAMSI officials replaced by Solomon Islanders.

The May 19 *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that after a "lively discussion" with Sogavare, Downer told reporters he was satisfied the new Solomons government was not planning to "dilute" RAMSI's role. "We wouldn't want in any way to see the integrity of RAMSI diluted and I'm satisfied with my conversations with the prime minister and the foreign minister that they're not planning to dilute the integrity of RAMSI", he said.

While stating that his government had "no problem with the presence of RAMSI here", Sogavare told reporters: "What we would like to see is an exit strategy which is clear."

On May 20, Downer told the Solomons radio program Talking Truth that RAMSI would immediately leave if it were blocked from doing its full job, according to a May 21 *Sydney Morning Herald* article. The next day, after Downer had left the country, Sogavare told reporters: "I think that's a bit of a bully tactic. At some point in time we need to take over from expatriates in all these posts."

The colonial-style RAMSI operation was approved by the Solomons parliament in July 2003 after Canberra cut off all aid to the country in 2002 and the Solomons' economy, already hard hit by the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98, collapsed.

In June 2003, the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute issued *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of the Solomon Islands*, which provided the blueprint for RAMSI. Calling the Solomons a "failed state", the document stated 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".

---

**P.S.**

\* From Green Left Weekly, May 31, 2006.