

Submission to Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade: Inquiry into Australia's involvement in peacekeeping operations

Thank you for the opportunity to provide views on Australia's involvement in peacekeeping operations.

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) is an independent national association of Australian non-government organisations (NGOs) working in the field of international aid and development. Our comments relate to two aspects of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference:

- (b) the training and preparedness of Australians likely to participate in a peacekeeping operation; and
- (d) lessons learnt from recent participation in peacekeeping operations that would assist government to prepare for future operations.

Specifically our comments refer to the Australian Federal Police (AFP) involvement in the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI).

ACFID's role in pre-deployment briefing for AFP involved in RAMSI

The ACFID Secretariat provides a regular monthly pre-deployment briefing session to AFP officers departing for Solomon Islands as part of RAMSI. ACFID's presentation focuses on "*Solomon Islands civil society and its relationship to the work of Australian NGOs*" and is informed by feedback from the 20 ACFID members that currently work with a wide range of local Solomon Islands partner organisations.

ACFID members working in Solomon Islands include large and small organisations such as World Vision Australia, Oxfam Australia, The Leprosy Mission, Fred Hollows Foundation; faith-based organisations such as Caritas, Adventist Relief and Development Agency (ADRA), Anglican Board of Mission; and volunteer sending agencies, e.g. Australian Volunteers International (AVI) and Australian Business Volunteers (ABV). The views here do not relate to these specific organisations. Rather ACFID's views have been formed as a result of ongoing feedback from several organisations.

Comments

- ***ACFID commends the AFP on recent refinement of its pre-deployment training that now incorporates Solomon Islands Pidgin language training.*** ACFID had previously regarded the lack of language training as a barrier to police communication with their Solomon Islands colleagues and with the community.
- ***ACFID recommends AFP officers be deployed in Solomon Islands for similar time frames as their Pacific Islander police colleagues.*** Unlike their Pacific Islander police colleagues (Samoans, Tongans,

I-Kiribati, etc whose deployment is for approximately 9 months), AFP officers are deployed to the Solomon Islands for a very short time (approximately 4 months). Consistent feedback from many Solomon Islands partner agencies is that the AFP has been hampered by the inability of many of its deployed staff to develop mutually respectful professional and personal relationships. These relationships are integral to effective engagement with Solomon Islanders and to confidence in Australia's approach to RAMSI.

- ***ACFID recommends means by which the AFP officers could more closely identify with the Solomon Islands community***

Whilst appreciating that the nature of police work demands a certain degree of detachment, the current perception is that AFP are too removed from the community.

- ***Cultural immersion.***
Currently the AFP is provided with an excellent cultural briefing session undertaken by the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) Program of Australian National University (ANU). ACFID recommends that additional cultural immersion also become part of the AFP preparations. For example, Australian Volunteers International (AVI) and other volunteer placements initially immerse Australians into a village setting both as a means of better understanding culture and of enhancing local language skills. Solomon Islands civil society groups would no doubt welcome the opportunity to arrange a program of village stays at the commencement of each AFP officer's time in Solomon Islands.
- ***Local produce***
The current practice whereby food for the AFP is airlifted from overseas is much criticised within the Solomon Islands community. This practice, together with the very separate accommodation arrangements for AFP staff create a substantial gap between them and Solomon Island communities. An AFP policy to promote local purchasing would help the local economy and also improve community perceptions about the AFP having an '**elite lifestyle**' which hampers their true understanding of Solomon Islands issues and culture.
- ***Joint Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP) and AFP training – gender and reproductive health***
The AFP needs to ensure that its deployed staff has undertaken gender, reproductive health and HIV awareness training as part of their normal work. Given the high incidence of domestic violence and also the high incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the Solomon Islands, it is recommended that *joint* training sessions be run with the RSIP and AFP officers. Joint training sessions could enhance effectiveness and open up

discussion of some cultural practices that currently contribute, especially to domestic violence.

- ***Go beyond policing***
ACFID respects the capacity-building role undertaken by AFP with their RSIP colleagues. We understand too that importance is placed by RAMSI on understanding issues of the Solomon Islands community (eg as shown by the ***People's Survey Pilot 2006 – Solomon Islands*** whereby RAMSI seeks to obtain information on community perceptions). We are also aware that monthly meetings are held between RAMSI staff and Honiara-based civil society groups. However, rather than only information sharing, there is an evident need for the AFP to engage more closely with Solomon Islands' civil society groups. This would assist AFP officers to go beyond basic policing duties and enable them to develop a better grasp of the many Solomon Islands' community strengths.

We trust that these comments assist in the inquiry's investigation and thank you for the opportunity to contribute.

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