SOLOMON ISLANDS

Manfred Ernst

BASIC INFORMATION

The Land

The Solomon Islands are located 10° south of the equator in the south-western part of the Pacific Ocean, bordering Papua New Guinea to the west and Vanuatu to the south-east. Geographically the group is a scattered continuation of the landmass of Papua New Guinea. The total land area is 27,560 sq km, spread over 900 islands. The six major islands are Choiseul, New Georgia, Isabel, Malaita, Makira and Guadalcanal, which contain over 95 per cent of the total land area, while the other islands and low lying atolls range down to mere dots in the vast ocean area of roughly 1.5 million sq km that belongs to the Solomon Islands (Tovutovu and de Bruijn 2002:1). Most of the land consists of hills and rugged mountains covered with tropical rainforest, while the rest consists of coastal plains and low lying atolls. The climate is tropical, with temperatures ranging from 20° to 34° C all year around. There is a high rainfall, concentrated in the period November to April, which is also the season for frequent cyclones. The majority of the population of 409,042 (1999) lives on the less than 10 per cent of flat coastal plains and lagoon islands and atolls. As a whole the Solomon Islands have a very low population density, with only 13 persons per sq km. However, the ratio is relative because the majority of people live on the coastal plains and atolls.

Land Ownership

According to Ruthven 83.2 per cent of the land area is held under the indigenous customary land tenure system (1979: 249). Of the remaining area of non-customary land 8.6 per cent is owned by Solomon Islanders, 8.0 per cent by the government, and 0.2 per cent by others. Approximately half of the non-customary land is owned by or leased out to companies and churches.

The People

The 1999 census recorded a population of 409,042 people of whom 197,661 were females and 211,381 were males (de Bruijn and Beimer 2002:6). While its population size ranks the Solomon Islands third in the South Pacific, after Papua New Guinea and Fiji, on a global level the country is considered a microstate. Since the 1986 census the country has experienced an average annual population growth rate of 2.8 per cent, which is considerably lower than in the intercensal period before 1986 but still puts the country at 38th position internationally. Since the 1986 census, the urban population has increased by 73 per cent to 63,732 persons, but by any standards this is small, with less than 16 per cent of the population living in areas
defined as urban. This urban sector of just under 64,000 is dominated by the capital Honiara, which accommodates more than three-quarters of all urban residents. The other main urban centres in order of population are Noro, Gizo, Auki and Tulagi. All of them are much smaller and deserve urban status only by virtue of their administrative function. The most significant development was the evolution of Noro in the Western Province from a mere village into the second largest settlement in the country (de Bruijn 2002:30). It must be noted that 84 per cent of the population remains in rural settlements having an average of fewer than ten households and less than 60 inhabitants. The age structure, as is typical for most developing countries, is pyramid shaped, indicating a very young population. The percentage of the population under 15 years of age is as large as 41.5 (compared to 47.3 per cent in 1986).

The 1999 census classified the ethnic groups in the Solomon Islands as follows: Melanesians 94.5 per cent, Polynesians 3.0 per cent, Micronesians 1.2 per cent, Europeans 0.2 per cent, Chinese 0.1 per cent, mixed 0.7 per cent and other 0.3 per cent. The distribution of ethnicity shows marked areas of concentration that reflect the history and development of the country. For example, 56 per cent of all Europeans and 79 per cent of all Chinese live in Honiara. Micronesians are strongly represented in Choiseul with 26 per cent and Western Province with 44 per cent. People of Polynesian descent are concentrated in the remote provinces of Rennell-Bellona and Temotu, with 93 per cent of the population there being of Polynesian descent (de Bruijn and Beimers 2002:34). The Micronesians are descended from 20th century migrants, while the Polynesians are indigenous to their outlying small islands.

Language

If language is viewed as a cultural resource in which people find their identity and have the ability to communicate freely, then the Solomon Islands is richly endowed with such resources. The 1999 census recognized 91 vernacular languages. The official language is English, the lingua franca is Solomon Islands Pidgin, and there are numerous local languages, some with several dialects. Many people are multilingual, while some, especially in remote areas, still speak only their own vernacular. In the 1999 census attention was drawn to those vernaculars with fewer than 200 speakers and of which the speaker population has been shrinking since 1976. Accordingly 18 vernaculars are listed as endangered and may disappear forever over the coming decades (de Bruijn and Beimers 2002:48).

Health

Malaria is the single and most important health issue in the Solomon Islands. The country has one of the highest malaria incidence rates in the world. In 1992 the rate reached its highest level of 440 confirmed cases per thousand people. Despite some improvement, malaria, (particularly the most lethal Plasmodium falciparum type), is still an important cause of death in the Solomon Islands, particularly for children. The overall incidence rate in 1998 was 165 per thousand, a rate similarly found in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the highest incidence rates in the world are found (Groenwold and van Ginneken 2002:98).

Between 1976 and 1999 the average number of children a woman could expect to give birth to fell from 7.1 to 4.8 (Groenwold and van Ginneken 2002: 82). Infant mortality rates have been declining from as high as 68 (girls) and 74 (boys) per thousand. This is one contributing factor in the increase between 1986 and 1999 of life expectancy for men from 54.3 to 60.6 years and for women from 55 to 66.6 years.
Over 60 per cent of the 65,014 households in the Solomon Islands live in houses constructed from palm leaves using traditional building techniques. Such houses are the standard in rural areas and classified as ‘temporary’, not because they lack quality, but because the materials used require more frequent replacement than concrete, brick, timber or corrugated iron. Forty per cent of the population have no access to piped water. Rivers and streams are the most important source for drinking water, at 21 per cent, followed by rainwater tanks at 16 per cent. With the increase of the population, rivers and streams will increasingly be at risk from pollution and contamination, jeopardizing public health. Overall fewer than one in four households have toilet facilities in the form of either flush, pour or pit toilets, and again, given the rapid population growth, this is an area of concern (Tovutovu and Schoorl 2002:218–219).

Overall the 1999 census reveals a reasonable improvement in health service delivery as far as the provision of malaria bed nets, birth attendance by medically trained staff and medical check-ups are concerned. But these improvements cannot disguise the fact that compared with other nations in the South Pacific, health services in the Solomon Islands are poor.

Education

The Solomon Islands is one of the few countries in the world in which education is not compulsory. The schooling system comprises six grades of standard primary education and a maximum of six grades of secondary education (Otter 2002: 46–58). There is no university in the Solomon Islands except the extension services available at the University of the South Pacific Centre in the capital Honiara. In order to get a higher degree most students move to Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Australia or New Zealand. Only the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE) in Honiara offers a range of tertiary education, for which some schools offer a preparatory year.

One in eight schools is still under the authority of a church. Primary education is relatively widely available throughout the country, while access to secondary education is restricted. The current system is insufficient to cater for the educational needs of the whole potential student population. In the 1999 census 27 per cent of the population aged 10 years and older (60,330 persons) are recorded as having never received any education.

Only 3.8 per cent of the population aged 10 years and older have any higher university degree (Masters or PhD) and two fifths of this small group of 8,524 persons are expatriates.

The Solomon Islands literacy rate of 76.6 per cent (83.7 per cent for men and 69 per cent for women) is among the lowest in the South Pacific Islands. Literacy is clearly age related, with many more illiterate people in the category over 50 years of age. Overall there are 55,613 illiterate persons in the Solomon Islands, of whom 64 per cent are women. There are huge differences in the provincial distribution of illiterate people, with 25,682 illiterate people on Malaita alone. Other pockets with very low literacy rates are to be found in Temotu, Guadalcanal and Central Province (de Bruijn and Beimers 2002: 73).
Table 1: Distribution of population aged 10 and older, not attending schools by census year and by highest level of education obtained.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>105,687</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>157,888</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>221,968</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>40.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No education(^a)</td>
<td>53,640</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>62,761</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>60,330</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>-3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard</td>
<td>47,589</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>78,991</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>122,607</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>55.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form 1–3(^b)</td>
<td>2,289</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>10,788</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>21,449</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>371.3</td>
<td>98.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form 4–6(^c)</td>
<td>1,413</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>3,554</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>6,931</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>151.5</td>
<td>95.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>2,127</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>123.5</td>
<td>255.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1,195</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>8,524</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>144.9</td>
<td>613.3</td>
</tr>
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</table>

\(^a\) Includes pre-school in 1999
\(^b\) For 1976 census Forms 1–2 and 3–6 respectively
\(^c\) Only including university in 1976 and 1986.

Despite these depressing figures all education indicators show an improvement. There is a definite increase in the percentages for school attendance, attained level of education and literacy, although there are substantial differences between the provinces, with Western Province, Choiseul and Honiara performing well and Temotu, Malaita and to a lesser extent Central Province lagging behind. Despite some positive developments in recent years the Solomon Islands remain one of the poorest achievers in terms of education of all South Pacific Island nations.

**Economy**

The economic patterns shown by the most reliable source, the last census (1999), were clearly affected by the ethnic tension of that time. This was most obvious in the disruption of both large scale and small scale production on Guadalcanal. The economic impact of the ethnic tensions were certainly felt on Malaita, which received an unprecedented number of people fleeing Guadalcanal, most of them finding shelter with relatives in villages. However, despite some concomitant inaccuracies, the 1999 census documents a number of interesting changes since the 1986 census.

In absolute terms trade rose between the censuses from just over SI$100 million in 1986 to over SI$700 million in 1999. This expansion was basically related to the rapid growth in exports of fish and timber, which accounted for 75 per cent of all trade receipts. It was especially the export of timber that grew in importance: this accounted for about 60 per cent of the value of all exports. Other important and mostly export-related production activities were in coconuts, cocoa, rice, and increasingly palm oil. A variety of other agricultural products such as chili, vegetables and honey have been promoted in rural areas in an attempt to diversify production. The intensity of logging has been and still is controversial because production is at twice the sustainability level and ownership is in the hands of unscrupulous foreign companies. In the Solomon Islands fishing is an important economic activity at three different levels: subsistence, small-scale cash and large-scale offshore. There are two major fish companies operating in the country: Solomon Taiyo Ltd (STL) and National Fisheries Development (NFD). There are also some smaller joint ventures between provinces and foreign fishing companies.
STL, which came into being in 1973, is a joint venture of Japanese Taiyo Gyogyo (now Maruha Corporation), owning 49 per cent, and the Solomon Islands Government. In its initial stage the company was based at Tulagi, Florida Islands, in the Central Province, but it expanded its operations with the opening of a new cannery in Noro in 1989. The immediate benefits are revenues received from licence fees paid by the foreign fishing fleets to fish within the 200 mile exclusive economic zone. STL provides employment for more than 2,000 Solomon Islanders in the capacity of fishermen, captains, engineers, electricians, carpenters, office clerks, administrators, and cannery workers (most of whom used to be women). From local villagers STL buys vegetables, sweet potatoes and farm products such as chicken and pork. In 1999 the company produced nearly a million cases of canned tuna, of which about 25 per cent was sold within the Solomon Islands (Friesen, Schoorl and Tovutovu 2002:143). Its operations were disrupted, however, in early 2000 when it temporarily ceased production as a result of the ethnic tensions and after the confiscation of one of its fishing boats by militants. Critics have raised concerns about the social and environmental impact of STL’s operations on the Roviana communities and about the sustainability of large scale fishing (Talasasa 1996).

Other areas of growing economic importance are mining, manufacturing and tourism, and these too were badly affected by the ethnic tensions. Despite all newer developments the backbone of the Solomon Islands economy is clearly still agriculture, with the great majority of households still active in subsistence production. Of the adult population of the country only 23 per cent were enumerated in the 1999 census as paid workers. The majority of the adult population is technically unemployed, being engaged in subsistence activities such as gardening, growing crops, house construction or productive household work. Of the 57,472 paid employees in 1999, 11,859 were related to agricultural production. Other significant sectors are manufacturing with 7,237 employees, wholesale and retail sales with 7,275 employees, public administration with 4,337 employees and education with 4,324 employees. Looking at the future areas of potential growth, real estate and home services, manufacturing and wholesale and retail sales had promising growth rates in the period from 1986 to 1999, while employment in agriculture, despite a growth in total numbers, experienced a negative growth of -2.4 per cent in the same period.

However, there have recently been positive signs of recovery. The economy of the Solomon Islands rebounded strongly after the crisis. With a 5.6 per cent growth rate in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2003, and 4.2 per cent growth in 2004, the Solomon Islands have experienced higher growth rates than eight other Pacific Island nations (Fiji, PNG, Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati, Cook Islands and Tuvalu) (ESCAP 2005: 88). Estimates for further growth are in the 4–5 per cent range, depending on further improvements in the law and order situation and better fiscal management. There are good prospects for the rehabilitation of oil palm plantations, where production came almost to a standstill during the ethnic tensions. Foreign investment remains low because of the frequency of disputes over land rights. A culture of compensation appears to have developed, due to lack of firmness by the government in honouring contracts. Investments in infrastructure are badly needed to get the products efficiently and reliably to markets. Of great concern is the unsustainable management of forestry and fisheries. It is estimated that in 2003 more than 700,000 cubic metres of logs were felled (ESCAP 2005: 92). Australia’s support in the strengthening of key government departments seems to be effective, with tax collection
strengthened and expenditure control tightened. The budget deficit fell from 9.6 per cent in 2002 to 1.4 per cent in 2003 (ESCAP 2005: 93).

**Government and Politics**

In order to understand Solomon Islands politics and recent problems and developments, an overview of major historical events is provided in order to promote a better understanding of the present situation and perspectives for the future.

**History and Development**

According to present knowledge, settlement in the area that today constitutes the Solomon Islands can be traced back to as early as 10,000 BC. Hunters and gatherers arrived from Southeast Asia via Papua New Guinea. Around 1,500 BC, groups of Austronesian-speaking people began to arrive, occupying the smaller and relatively uninhabited outer islands. "These early migrations were by no means peaceful. Many established tribal village populations were eliminated by the explorers; this in turn brought about the defensive inclination to attack all strangers, which ultimately became a way of life" (Carlin 2004a:11).

European exploration started in the 1560s, with a Spanish expedition led by Alvaro de Mendana looking for the legendary Inca 'islands of gold.' It was Mendana who named the islands after the biblical king Solomon. He was followed by British explorer Carteret who discovered Malaita in 1767, French explorer Bougainville who came upon Choiseul in 1768, and British explorer Shortland who in 1788 sailed along the coasts of San Cristobal and Guadalcanal.

In 1845 the first missionaries arrived, seven Catholic priests and six lay brothers of the French Marists. Because of ongoing local hostility and other hardships they left three years later without any success. Lasting mission work was begun in the 1850s by the Melanesian (Anglican) Mission. However, until 1890 the European presence was restricted to a few missionaries and traders until the area was declared a British protectorate in 1893, which it remained until the declaration of independence on 7 July 1978. A German protectorate established over the Northern Solomons (Santa Isabel, Choiseul and some smaller islands) was later secured by the British. Bougainville and Buka were under the Germans too until a deal was made between Germany and Britain, securing German control over Samoa in exchange for British control over Bougainville and Buka. The first resident commissioner of the British Solomon Islands, Charles Woodford, based himself at Tulagi and planted the seeds there of a centralized form of government for the historically, ethnically and culturally diverse group. Population growth was steady, interrupted only by epidemics introduced by the Europeans in the 19th century and by massive labour recruiting for the colonial sugar plantations in Fiji and Australia. Between 1870 and 1914 an estimated 30,000 Solomon Island men were recruited by the so-called 'blackbirders,' using methods that bordered on enslavement. From May 1942 to December 1943 the Solomon Islands were the scene of the cruellest and fiercest battles in the conflict between the Japanese and the allied forces led by the Americans. The defeat of the Japanese led in 1944 to the transfer of the government from Tulagi to Honiara, where advantage was taken of the infrastructure established there by the Americans.

The years from 1946 to 1950 saw the development and suppression of a nationalistic, anti-British movement that became known as Maasina Rule (Marching Rule), which sprang
from Malaita. Economic development was slow and the indigenous population benefited little from having handed over lands and people to work on foreign-owned plantations. Reading the warning signs and following the general worldwide trend of decolonization after World War II, the British conferred independence on 7 July 1978. The form of government adopted was a constitutional monarchy within the Commonwealth. The British monarch is represented by a Governor General, and executive power is in the hands of the national cabinet headed by the Prime Minister. The parliament consists of 50 members, each of whom is elected from a constituency. The second administrative level is formed by the nine provinces and the Honiara Town Council. The provinces of Choiseul, Western, Isabel, Central, Rennell-Bellona, Guadalcanal, Malaita, Makira-Ulawa, Temotu and Honiara are again subdivided into 183 wards (Tovutovu and de Bruijn 2002: 1).

The Ethnic Conflict 1998–2004

An attempt to provide a full coverage of the background and development of the crisis that gripped the Solomon Islands after 1998 is impossible here. However, it is hoped to provide the reader with a chronology of events, together with a sketch of the background and progress of the crisis and an account of the main actors and groups involved. For further reading Fraenkel’s well researched, fully documented and comprehensive study of the crisis is highly recommended (Fraenkel 2004).

In 1998 the extraordinary conflict that broke out led on 5 June 2000 to the armed takeover of an elected government and later (in July 2003) to the first foreign intervention in an independent Pacific Island nation since World War II.

The immediate background to the crisis is to be seen in the forced displacement of approximately 20,000 settlers, the vast majority of them Malaitans in rural Guadalcanal, by groups of young Guadalcanalese militants (Dinnen 2003: 4). Who were these militants and what triggered off the massive displacement of Malaitans from Guadalcanal?

The majority of the members of the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA), later renamed the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), are believed to be Roman Catholics and sprung from the Moro Movement. This was a breakaway group from the Roman Catholic Church, originating in the 1960s on the southeast side of the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, an area that is very isolated and undeveloped. The Moro Movement thrived originally on going back to Guadalcanal ‘kastom,’ including the ancient gods, and traditional dress, and the refusal to use Western technology and Western ways of living. It was named after the chief Moro of Makaruka, an indigenous cult leader who was hostile to ongoing Malaitan migration to Guadalcanal. Fraenkel writes:

Yet the Moro Movement was not simply anti-Malaitan. Like Maasina Rule, it was an indigenous self-help and return-to-kastom movement. It rejected the colonial ‘waste lands’ policy and expressed concern that the boundaries of the land of Honiara are still moving into the land of the natives (Fraenkel 2004: 32).

In 1999 the GRA borrowed the term ‘Isatabu’ from the Moro Movement, to replace the name Guadalcanal inherited from the Spanish. Many of the IFM fighters wore traditional Guadalcanal Kabalet (loin cloths) and a traditional string around the neck as used by adherents of the Moro Movement. They used various forms of magic to protect themselves from gunfire. The main weapons were traditional spears, home-made guns and surplus arms from World War II.
The roots of the crisis that culminated in the outbreak of violence in 1998 are complex and involve multi-layered geographical, historical and demographic forces. Land and land ownership are the fundamental elements, and are central to the surrounding issues of ethnic identity and hostility. As far as demographic forces are concerned, the rapidly expanding population in the 1980s and 1990s increased the pressures on land and social structures. Unequal development between the nine provinces, difficulties in managing the national economy, and large scale exploitation of natural resources by powerful external entities without sufficient return in investment in local infrastructure, fuelled profound dissatisfaction in indigenous landowners in other parts of the country, also in the years preceding the outbreak of the crisis. The crisis itself involved the long-standing grievances of indigenous Guadalcanalese people about the acquisition and occupation of land by outsiders, in particular Malaitans, in rural Guadalcanal and around Honiara after WWII. Over time these grievances mounted up, and culminated at the beginning of 1999 in the forced removal of Malaitans, who were seen as those that had been taking the jobs, land and women belonging to the people of Guadalcanal.

Tensions associated with Malaitan migration had been building for many years and were experienced most acutely by the indigenous inhabitants in the least developed parts of the island. They arose from perceptions that Malaitan settlers had prospered at the expense of local people and were aggravated by sale of customary land to settlers and the latter’s disrespect for Guadalcanal custom (Dinnen 2003: 7).

Another important factor in the run-up to the crisis was that “in traditional Malaitan society, customary land tenure is held in the male line and for Guadalcanese people, the female” (Carlin 2004: 10). As a result Malaitan migrants married local women and acquired land, established homes, and progressed economically better than the indigenous Guadalcanalese. By the end of 1999 a militia group had formed in Malaita and became known as the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF). The delay in the formation is explained by Fraenkel: it was “because the state itself had served de facto as such an organization, given the preponderance of Malaitans in the Police Field Force ranks and the ability of Malaitan officers to conduct operations against the IFM under official auspices” (Fraenkel 2004: 78).

In June 2000 the MEF, supported by police and paramilitary police personnel loyal to Malaita, raided police armouries, seized control of Honiara and forced the resignation of Prime Minister Bart Ulufa’alu. The armed takeover was accompanied by neither the abrogation of the 1978 constitution nor the removal of the Governor General. Three weeks later, Parliament reassembled and elected a new government led by opposition leader Manasseh Sogavare. The coup caused a fresh wave of displacement, now mainly involving Honiara’s non-Malaitan residents fleeing the capital. In a short time the population of Gizo, the administrative centre for the Western Province, doubled from 4,000 to 8,000. Two days after the coup, the MEF publicly declared an ‘all-out war’ on the IFM, which resulted in increased fighting to the east and west of Honiara. Because they had raided the police armoury, the MEF clearly had the upper hand in terms of arms, holding approximately 1,000 weapons, including pistols, assault rifles, and 100 Ultramair machine guns (Fraenkel 2004: 90). More and more it was clear that Andrew Nori, son of one of the founders of the Maasina Rule movement and former Minister of Finance from the Are’ Are district on Malaita, a lawyer by profession, had surfaced as the most articulate MEF spokesperson and leader.
Once installed, the new government developed a 100 day action plan that included at its core the payment of compensation for property lost by Malaitans and provision for an amnesty for the two militia groups. This is what has correctly been described as a ‘money before peace’ approach. In his excellent analysis Fraenkel comments:

Crucial to analyzing the dynamics of the Solomon Islands conflict was the way compensation demands and reconciliation ceremonies were manipulated for provincial and personal gains. Those responsible were not kastom leaders, biding their time while the shaky edifice of Westminster democracy crumbled. They were people who had once enjoyed positions at the helm of that nation state, and in the unsettled atmosphere occasioned by the instabu uprising sought new strategies to rejuvenate their fading political careers. They were outsiders who had tasted the fruits of being insiders (2004: 185–86).

As an interesting footnote the money for compensation payments was given by the government of Taiwan, which is seeking recognition in the South Pacific as elsewhere in the world. A ceasefire agreement signed on 3 August 2000 proved to be fragile, as it was followed by continuing occasional murders and property damage, both inside and outside of Honiara. Nevertheless, as a result of growing international concern, a peace summit held in Townsville (Australia) in October 2000 resulted in a more comprehensive peace agreement between the major factions. Monitoring and disarmament were included, but major deficiencies in the agreement were “its overestimation of the capacity of the Solomon Islands state to implement its provisions; its failure to address underlying problems; and its failure to disarm militants” (Dinnen 2003: 8).

Elections held in December 2001 led to the election of Sir Allan Kemakeza, the former Deputy Prime Minister and MP from Savo, Russell Islands. The election, which was entirely funded by international donors, was described as fair and free by a nearly 80–strong International Observer Team. Kemakeza, who was knighted for the role he played in the peace process, is highly controversial in the Solomons, not least because he was sacked by the previous government for allegedly paying himself compensation for property damage, as well as because of a suspicious connection with the South Korean religious leader Moon (Solomon Star 31.01.2003).

After Kemakeza’s election the tensions relaxed initially, but intensified again in 2002, finally resulting in July 2003 in an official request by the Governor General for international help through the Pacific Forum’s Biketawa Agreement under which member countries call upon each other for help. This request resulted in the first foreign military intervention in a Pacific Islands nation since World War II, with the arrival of the Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands (RAMSI) on 24 July 2003. Under the leadership of Australia and with the catch phrase Operation ‘Helpem Fren’ (Helping a Friend), a total of over 2,000 military and police personnel, including soldiers and police from Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea, were deployed in the Solomons. According to Fraenkel this was “a carefully crafted exercise to avoid allegations of neo-colonialism” (2004: 160).

At the time of writing (April 2005) it seems that Operation ‘Helpem Fren’ has been successful in its most urgent task of securing almost all weaponry and more generally in restoring law and order after the conflict, which might be categorized as a civil war of low intensity. Leaders and others responsible for a variety of crimes from destruction of property to rape and murder have systematically been brought before the courts and sentenced, in preparing for the critical post-crisis phase of reconstruction and reconciliation. On 18 March 2005 it was reported that Harold Keke, Ronny Cawa and Francis Lela had been found
guilty of the murder of Father Augustine Geve on a Weather Coast beach in August 2002. All three were sentenced to life imprisonment. This verdict was praised by Australia’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, and Minister for Justice and Customs, Chris Ellison, as a significant achievement for the Solomon Islands, since it demonstrated that no person in the country was above the law and that all defendants would receive a fair trial. Keke’s trial was the first of many arising from acts committed during the conflict period.

**Outlook**

God Save our Solomon Islands from shore to shore.
Bless all her people and her lands, with your protecting hands.
Joy, peace and prosperity.
That men should brothers be, make nations see.
Our Solomon Islands, Our Solomon Islands.
Our Nation, Solomon Islands, stands for evermore
(Solomon Islands National Anthem).

When this anthem was adopted along with a new flag and constitution on 7 July 1978 there was certainly pride, joy and hope for a prosperous future. In 2005, 27 years later, the Solomon Islands may be seen as a nation that is on the edge of self-destruction, or on the verge of becoming to the South Pacific what Haiti has been to the Caribbean for the past two decades. The economy is down, foreign reserves are depleted, staples and food are lacking, services are virtually non-existent, and an apparently paralyzed government, seen by many as tainted with corruption, faces huge challenges to which previous governments were not able to respond. In academic and policy making circles the questionable and analytically not very useful notion of ‘failed states’ has been used with increasing frequency with reference to the Solomon Islands (as well as to PNG, Vanuatu and Fiji). Following the Townsville Peace Agreement, the initially successful intervention by RAMSI and the restoration of law and order, there is still serious danger of further conflicts but also opportunities for positive transformations. Whether the Solomon Islands will ‘sink or swim’ will depend on skilful navigation away from the waves of violent ethnic conflict and towards political, social and economic recovery (Chevalier 2000: 84).

Where are the Solomon Islands today, mid 2005? What is the starting point for reconstruction and reconciliation?

Accurate casualty figures are hard to obtain. Estimates of lives lost in the period from 1998 to 2004 vary between 100 and 500. However, to put these figures into perspective it must be said that the relatively low level of violence, compared to similar situations in other parts of the world, is remarkable. In other words, where else could one find 20,000 people expelled from their homes, an attempted coup and two badly trained and ill-disciplined militia groups fighting each other over a period of four years, with so little violence or loss of life?

The militarization of men and youths is the deepest threat created by the crisis, and it will be difficult to resolve. The unscrupulous compensation payments and the effects of the crisis on the economy have led the country almost into bankruptcy because of the difficulty of repaying the accumulated national and foreign debt. The multiple effects of the crisis have the economy in a disastrous condition. Too many people have lost the incomes they derived from formal and non-formal employment. Income decline and subsequent multiplier effects have seriously reduced cash flows in all the provinces right down to village level. Many people who have lost property and possessions cannot afford to replace them. There
is an urgent need to restore income and generate employment, but restoring investment and business opportunities requires confidence that peace will be maintained. An opportunity created by the crisis is the increased awareness of the necessity and pressure for more economic development in the provinces.

The large displacement of people, particularly but not exclusively from Guadalcanal and Malaita, poses both risks and opportunities for the future. Up to 40,000 people, almost 10 per cent of the entire population, have been displaced from their former homes and occupations. A lot of them are moving back to their original roots, but others prefer to settle in coastal areas rather than in isolated bush areas that lack services. Consequently, pressure has increased on services, land, and food security in smaller islands such as Rennell-Bellona and the Reef Islands and coastal areas of north Malaita. Land disputes are increasing and are likely to escalate further, due to the need to accommodate newcomers and the contesting of existing land use by returning landowners. The impact of displacement has been very diverse within and between provinces. Some provinces are actually benefiting from the return of skilled people, particularly in public services, business and medicine.

Displaced children and youth are placing enormous pressures on the school system, and many are unable to secure a place. The provinces need more secondary schools, tertiary institutions, distance education centres and rural training centres. Otherwise students from the provinces will be permanently disadvantaged. There is now the opportunity to reform the secondary education system, moving away from the existing one that develops a small elite at the expense of many drop-outs.

National pharmacy services have huge unpaid bills, and this has created treatment shortages. Immunization coverage rates have dropped rapidly, particularly in Guadalcanal and more isolated areas, which increases the likelihood of epidemics. The seeds from a silent but lethal public health disaster arising from HIV/AIDS are growing rapidly, and this could kill far more young people in the coming years than those who were killed by weapons during the crisis.

Alienation and marginalization have been reinforced by an urban youth culture that gives opportunities for recreational sex, the use of marijuana, home brew, and freedom from traditional authority. Militarization has revived young men's traditional roles as warriors, and provided them with a cause, status, power and income – all denied to them before the conflict. One benefit of the conflict, however, may be the lessening of the attractions of Honiara, which will reduce 'wokabaut' (short-term migration) and urban alienation.

The Solomon Islands are a nation of villages, islands and identities based on language and other cultural groupings. National identity is a recent phenomenon that came with independence, to some extent created by colonialism and maintained by post-colonial institutions. The cement holding the country together has clearly fractured along the lines of island and cultural identities. The ethnic conflict of recent years will be a subject of debate, resentment and possibly revenge for many years to come. As in Bougainville, a mixture of Christian and traditional reconciliation solutions might be useful for fostering greater ethnic tolerance. There is a need for acknowledging and catering for ethnic identity and differences, particularly in sensitive areas such as the police, prisons and the legal system, which should not be dominated again by one ethnic group. Demands by provinces for federal or independent statehood reflect both loss of trust in the national government and longstanding aspirations for an increased provincial autonomy. Successive national
governments have consistently ignored the provinces’ needs and given them meagre returns for the exploitation of their natural resources. There is resentment of large-scale development projects that benefit Honiara and the central government while leaving the provinces undeveloped. There are opportunities for the authentic decentralization of government, but the cost of setting up and maintaining state governments could be prohibitive, and the viability of the smaller provinces is questionable.

There is a strong demand for more decentralized development, which would bring more projects down to the provincial and village level. Given that local communities in the Solomon Islands are numerous and scattered, it is unlikely that there will ever be sufficient paid employment or educational opportunities to cater for all needs. This increases the imperative for more village-based development initiatives and for strengthening the capacity of community-based organizations. The demand for development at provincial level includes infrastructure such as roads, markets, wharves, business areas, clinics, study centres and schools. All provinces, not just Malaita, need special development assistance to allow them to create employment and income for their populations. Communities want direct assistance, which avoids middlemen and bottlenecks in Honiara, plus less complicated project application procedures. Better coordination between non-governmental organizations, High Commissions and donor agencies is needed in order to direct project proposals of different types and scale to the most appropriate agency or donor.

The churches are an important medium for the implementation of projects because of their widespread network and their access to independent funding from overseas partners. Most of the churches have women’s and youth groups providing social and community activities that could link peace building with development activities. Reconciliation and peace progress representatives and organizations of civil society are critical forces for promoting peace and reconciliation. There are real opportunities for strengthening the traditional roles of community, women and family through reconciliation. The churches, through the ecumenical Solomon Islands Association of Christian Churches (SICA) with its Peace Office, together with Women for Peace and various NGOs, have been an important prophetic voice of moderation and peace during the crisis. Churches and NGOs have an important role to play in trauma counseling, community restoration, and religious peace ceremonies, all of which will be essential in the years to come. Church organizations are probably the most important actors for reconciliation because of their widespread presence in all villages and the Christian doctrine of forgiveness that guides them. The churches can and must play an active role towards resolving the multiple problems of the nation. SICA has proved that the churches are able to work together effectively, despite a variety of denominational backgrounds, different histories, different doctrines and different sizes. The crisis has brought SICA to realize the full potential of ecumenical co-operation beyond old boundaries, and made it the only National Council of Churches in the whole region that is fully active and functioning.
RELIGION IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

Table 2: Religious Affiliation 1970–1999

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Total Population: 160,998 (100) 196,823 (100) 285,176 (100) 409,042 (100)


Data Analysis

Like other Pacific Islands nations the Solomon Islands have a plentiful variety of Christian denominations. Another similarity is that almost the whole population (98 per cent) belongs to one or another branch of Christianity. Practitioners of traditional pre-Christian religion still exist in some areas, however (de Bruijn 2002:36). The non-Christian category consists mainly of holders of traditional customary beliefs, adherents to the Bahá’í Faith and – in small numbers – people practising religions of Asian origin. The census of 1999 identified 20 different religious groups, but this does not fully exhaust the number of different Christian religious varieties present in the country. Many are lumped together under the category ‘Other Religions’, which represents 0.7 per cent of the total population and includes groups with sometimes just a handful of followers.

As shown in Table 2, the Church of Melanesia, representing a third of the total population in 1999, remains clearly the largest denomination, followed by four other major denominations, namely the Roman Catholic Church, the South Sea Evangelical Church,