Few issues in international politics have attracted more interest in recent years, and generated more activity, than the phenomenon of state failure. In failing states, sorrows come not as single spies but in battalions: lawlessness, civil war, corruption, political or ethnic division, breakdown of government services, economic meltdown. Furthermore, human suffering is not the end of it; failing states can produce wider security threats in the form of illegal people movements, organised crime, weapons and drugs trafficking, and even terrorism.

State failure describes a situation in which the basic functions of the state are no longer performed; however, the term covers a continuum of circumstances ranging from states in which basic public services are neglected to the total collapse of governance. Nomenclature can be highly sensitive in this field. States are understandably reluctant to be dubbed ‘failed’ or ‘broken’; hence the search for euphemisms such as ‘countries at risk of instability’.

If reinforcing and rebuilding weak states is vital, it is also hard. It is hard for foreigners to build strong indigenous institutions – almost as hard as it is to impose democracy without consent.

State failure is a particularly problematic concept in Pacific Island countries, as it implies that at one time the state functioned effectively. The term ‘state-building’ rather than ‘nation building’ has become the accepted use in this region. It refers to efforts to reconstruct an effective indigenous government in a state or territory where no such capacity exists or where the capacity has been seriously eroded.

The Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission in Solomon Islands (RAMSI) has exceeded expectations in restoring state authority and has made a good start in rebuilding the country. Law and order is the mission’s strong suit; there is also much activity underway to rebuild Solomon Islands institutions and reform the economy but we do not yet have enough evidence to be confident about the sustainability of this work if RAMSI were to leave.

The model developed by the Australia and its regional partners for the RAMSI intervention was unique with eight key features.

Preventive

Solomon Islands was in a parlous condition in mid-2003. The state was weak and vulnerable, it was heading in the direction of failure – but it had not yet failed. Some level of functioning government continued; the state was not itself a belligerent in the tensions; infrastructure was relatively intact; no humanitarian disaster had yet occurred. RAMSI was in the nature, then, of a preventive action: in Richard Ponzio’s view it ‘arguably broke new ground in lowering the threshold for intervention in the indisputably internal affairs of a sovereign state… To a degree not witnessed in international peacekeeping, insidious levels of crime, corruption and poor governance had become a primary impetus for external intervention, rather than a large humanitarian crisis.’

In this regard RAMSI was exceptional. Usually political will on the part of wealthy and powerful states fails to coalesce until it is too late, thereby preventing the translation of early warnings into effective action. Yet as Robert Rotberg has argued, ‘strengthening weak states against failure is far easier than reviving them after they have definitively failed or collapsed.’

Permissive

RAMSI was an intervention by consent, implemented only after formal requests from the Prime Minister and Governor-General of Solomon Islands as well as the unanimous passage of the enabling legislation through the country’s Parliament. The host state’s consent meant the mission did not offend the principle of non-intervention enshrined in Article 2(7) of the UN Charter; politically, it was the sine qua non for support from the Solomon Islands and Australian publics, as well as regional states and the international community.

Regional in nature

RAMSI’s regional nature is a source of strength. It was initiated under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Forum, the regional organisation comprising the sixteen independent countries of the central and south Pacific. It took place within the framework of the Forum’s Biketawa Declaration of 2000 – a document which sets out principles of good governance,
democracy, rule of law and human rights and recognises ‘the need, in times of crisis or in response to members’ request for assistance, for action to be taken on the basis of all members of the Forum being part of the extended Pacific Islands family’.

It was endorsed by Forum heads of government and foreign ministers. Forum members receive reports on RAMSI’s progress and the Forum’s Eminent Person’s Group (EPG) reviewed the mission in May 2005. RAMSI personnel include contributions from eleven Pacific states.

The Australian Government’s decision to constitute RAMSI as a regional mission – against alternative advice in favour of an ad hoc multilateral agency modelled on interventions in Bosnia-Herzegovina or Bougainville, possibly including Britain, Japan, France, the EU, the Commonwealth and the ASEAN Regional Forum – was both politic and sensible. It increased the perceived legitimacy of the operation, both inside and outside the Solomons, and it had operational advantages because of the familiarity of the Pacific personnel with Melanesian culture and customs. The PNG Defence Force, for instance, did a good job on the troublesome Weather Coast. Indeed, a regular (and not unjustified) criticism of RAMSI is that it should increase its Pacific representation, in terms of numbers, seniority and visibility.

Nationally-led

In its generally supportive review of RAMSI’s operations, the EPG noted that it ‘is perceived as a predominantly Australian exercise.’ Most of the planning for the mission was done in Canberra. The Australian Government negotiated the establishment of the mission directly with Honiara, albeit on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum. Both Special Coordinators, all Participating Police Force (PPF) commanders and almost all other principals have been Australians. The current Commissioner of the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP), Shane Castles, is a former senior AFP officer, although his predecessor was British. Most of the police, soldiers and officials have been Australians, with the only other sizeable contingent provided by New Zealand. The Australian Government has also borne the lion’s share of RAMSI’s cost (including the cost of most Pacific Island contingents), in the sum of approximately A$200-250 million per annum.

Australia’s role has not diminished the mission’s legitimacy in any way – if anything, RAMSI has too much legitimacy, as measured in the regular calls for it to do more and stay longer. There have also been advantages in terms of efficiency.

Because they were both largely within the power of one state, mandate design was simpler and deployment quicker than in most multilateral operations. Mandates for UN missions generally have to be negotiated (some would say litigated) between numerous parties. Simon Chesterman notes, for instance, that the work of the UN Protection Force in the former Yugoslavia was governed by 70 Security Council resolutions and dozens of statements by the Council President. Similarly deployment of UN missions is sometimes delayed by the lack of on-call personnel and pre-positioned equipment, which can, as Richard Caplan observes, create ‘opportunities for spoilers to cause serious and sometimes irreparable damage to a mission.’

By contrast, RAMSI’s objectives were settled quickly with Honiara and other participating capitals, and the deployment of its personnel began to occur, in an integrated manner, within a week of the Solomon Islands Parliament passing the enabling legislation. Discerning a national interest, Canberra has invested substantial financial resources in the mission and spoken consistently of a long-term effort, which is usually interpreted as meaning five to ten years.

The national component has yielded some advantages on the human resources side. Most RAMSI personnel share a common language and bureaucratic culture, and many have expertise in service delivery, which is rarely the case for international civil servants. The UN now has deep experience, of course, in running transitional administrations; fortunately most of the senior RAMSI people had spent time either in Pacific Island states, UN missions, or both. Furthermore the quality of the personnel deployed in Solomons has been generally high. Some UN staff in the field are first-rate professionals; others are not. A number of studies have pointed to the uneven quality of UN personnel. Thus while RAMSI’s human resources ceiling may be the same as a UN mission’s, its floor is probably higher.

Finally, the co-ordination of operations was better than is the case in many other multilateral missions. This was the first integrated mission attempted by the Australian Government, involving not only DFAT, AFP and ADF but AusAID, Treasury, the Department of Finance and many other agencies. There were, therefore, interdepartmental conflicts: ‘suffice to say there were some interesting meetings’, says one official. However decision-making was certainly made easier by the familiarity of bureaucratic structures and systems and the fact that the planners knew the implementers.

As another official told the author, Australia has some advantages in mounting this kind of operation: it is large enough to deploy people, assets and resources at scale, but small enough that personal connections are ubiquitous and collegial habits maintained. Certainly the simplicity of RAMSI’s organisational structure (with the Special Coordinator providing direction for the PPF commander, military commander, and development coordinator) is striking compared to the incoherent arrangements in, say, Bosnia-Herzegovina. Pity the poor High Representative in his office in Sarajevo, appointed by the Security Council on the recommendation of the Peace Implementation Council, who has no authority over the Stabilisation Force, and who has to contend with constellations of agencies and acronyms such as the OSCE, EU, UNHCR, UNDP, World Bank and ICRC, between whom the various sectors have been divvied up.

Supported by the UN

No blue helmets were deployed in support of RAMSI, nor was it endorsed in a resolution of the UN Security Council. Honiara’s close diplomatic and economic relations with Taipei might have prompted a Chinese veto of such a resolution, or at the very least seriously complicated its passage. As a result of concerns about the Chinese position as well as a feeling in Canberra that, in the words of one
official, ‘little advantage would be gained from an extra layer of bureaucracy’, no efforts were made to bring the issue before the Council. However there were ongoing briefings of both the Council and the Secretariat. Importantly for the legitimacy of the operation, there was a laying on of hands by the international community, in the form of statements of support from Secretary-General Kofi Annan on 16 August 2003 and Council President Fayssal Mekdad of Syria on 26 August 2003.

Some critics of the international organisation cite RAMSI’s success as part of an argument that the UN is superfluous and its state-building operations could be taken on by regional organisations. This argument is both ahistorical and unrealistic. It is ahistorical because Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter contemplates exactly this kind of regional action, so long as it is consistent with the purposes and principles of the UN. It is unrealistic because there is neither appetite nor capacity for further RAMSIs – probably not in the South Pacific and certainly not on the continent with the largest number of failing states, Africa. Rather, activity by regional organisations complements the work of the UN by freeing up the Council to focus on threats to international peace and security that cannot be solved regionally.

Non-sovereign

RAMSI has a unique kind of authority in the world of state-building – it has substantial practical influence but it works with and inside the Solomon Islands Government, which remains the repository of executive, legislative and judicial authority. The founding documents, such as the statements from the Pacific Islands Forum, refer to RAMSI not as a transitional administration or authority but as an ‘assistance package’ or a ‘framework for strengthened assistance’. The mission’s publicity material is even more explicit: ‘RAMSI does not control the government or make national decisions on behalf of Solomon Islands. The Parliament, Government, constitutional office holders and the public service all remain responsible for exercising their respective functions, and they remain accountable to the people of Solomon Islands.’

Richard Caplan has drawn a continuum of international administrations on which a mission’s position is determined by the degree of legal authority it possesses. The UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) is at the ‘supervision’ pole, and the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) is at the other, denoting ‘direct governance’. The Solomons mission is actually nowhere on this continuum: it does not even have supervisory authority. RAMSI is all about regime maintenance, not regime change.

One could, of course, draw an entirely different state-building continuum, on which a mission’s position was determined not by authority but by influence. RAMSI would certainly appear on that continuum, perhaps nearer to UNTAET than UNTAC. The mission’s leadership has very great influence in Honiara, based not only on its security and financial contributions to the country but its massive popularity amongst Solomon Islanders. This leverage is institutionalised in the form of so-called ‘in-line’ officials and police, expatriates who are placed directly into key positions in the Solomons public service or sensitive statutory positions such as Accountant-General. The in-line experiment was judged to be essential to the achievement of Australia’s policy objectives and for achieving immediate results given the lack of local capacity. It causes rumbles of opposition from a few locals, and occasionally insensitive behaviour on the part of RAMSI personnel has led to warnings from observers about a kind of creeping assumption of sovereignty. In fact, though, it is quite different.

The Solomons mission might have been quite different. The ASPI proposal, for instance, was for a Solomon Islands Rehabilitation Authority (SIRA), an ‘independent legal authority’ established to ‘take over the government of Solomon Islands’ in the areas of law and order and financial management. The Solomon Islands Government would have continued to run the remaining policy areas, though with substantial input from SIRA.

The approach eventually adopted by Canberra and operationalised as RAMSI was a better model than SIRA, for four reasons. First, it was achievable. It is unlikely that the Solomon Islands Government, or the Pacific Island states more generally, would have accepted a greater assumption of sovereignty. Solomons politicians only reluctantly agreed to in-line advisers, for instance, and many are probably now regretting that decision. Because of the preventive nature of the mission, consent for a takeover would not have been forthcoming, and if the intervention had proceeded without consent then regional and international support would not have been secured either. In other words, the different elements of the mission design were interconnected. Second, it was in the mission’s interests, keeping it ‘above politics’ and preventing it from assuming the slightly monarchical bearing for which the interventions in East Timor and Bosnia-Herzegovina have been criticised.

Third, it was in the Solomons’ interests. The alpha and omega of state-building is increasing indigenous capacity so that responsibility can be returned to the locals. The more existing institutions can be strengthened, the better. International practice and common sense would say it is inadvisable to drain current institutions, such as the Solomon Islands Government, of their legitimacy if there is an opportunity to boost them instead. Finally, it was in the interests of the contributing states, in particular Australia. If the mission had assumed formal authority, how would it return it, and to whom? The risks and costs of the operation would have been increased – and getting out of Solomons would have been near impossible.

The RAMSI model is not without hazards, of course. The biggest risk is that Honiara could revoke the consent it has granted: that movements in the Solomons political elite – especially after the forthcoming election – could deprive RAMSI of its patrons and result in its exit. This is certainly not a trivial risk, although the popular support for the mission would mean any government requesting that RAMSI depart would suffer very serious political pain. In fact, however, if Solomon Islanders’ elected representatives were ever to demand the departure of an international mission then it would have no option but to comply. The alternative – to remain in situ in the teeth of the legitimate government’s opposition – would surely be unthinkable.
Police-led

The establishment of internal security and the rule of law is an essential precondition for successful state-building: in the words of one experienced UN official, it is ‘the cement which holds the bricks of peace operations together.’ The absence of security has bedevilled any number of interventions. RAMSI achieved notable success by adopting a dual approach: the mission was police-led but backed by overwhelming military force at the time of entry.

No UN missions have been police-led to the extent of RAMSI. Whereas UN civilian police contingents have often been painfully slow to deploy, a sizeable PPF element was in the first wave of RAMSI’s deployment. In Solomons, the PPF took the lead role in planning and executing operations and the military contingent provided support for them; only the PPF had powers of independent arrest. Furthermore whereas UN officials and observers have noted that UN civilian police contingents are often under-trained and variable in quality, the PPF contingent, with the benefit of a more consistent policing philosophy, has received relatively high marks from observers. If civilian policing is ‘the Achilles heel’ of UN peacekeeping, it has been one of RAMSI’s notable strengths. The police-led nature of the intervention was, admittedly, conditioned by the comparatively benign security environment in Solomon Islands and the fact that RSIP was complicit in the widespread criminality. Nevertheless, it must be counted a successful innovation.

One of the reasons that the PPF was able to do its work effectively, of course, was the cover provided by the large military force deployed along with the police. The decision in favour of a significant military force was taken over the objections of elements of the New Zealand Government, which thought it may appear ‘militaristic’, and was regarded by some experts as unnecessary. However in retrospect it was correct. As Special Coordinator Nick Warner said: ‘we came in with a very large potent military force… We did that quite deliberately so that we didn’t have to use military force during this operation, and it worked. We got the attention very quickly of the militants and the thugs and the criminals, and they made a very correct strategic decision – that is, that it was better to co-operate with us than to take us on.’ Solomon Islanders interviewed by this author agreed: one said ‘it showed you mean business’; another described the ADF component as ‘Australian shock and awe.’ When Weather Coast militant leader Harold Keke was arrested in August 2003, an Australian warship was sitting at anchor in sight of Guadalcanal’s southern shore. Any fears that Wellington may have had about the military component were dispelled by the low-key, disciplined and professional way in which the personnel conducted themselves.

Light touch

Finally, one of the striking things about RAMSI to an outside visitor with experience of other international interventions is the relative lightness of touch it exhibits. Physically it adopts a fairly low profile. RAMSI arrived in Solomons under cover of darkness. The main contingent is located on an old resort out near the airport, with no sight lines to the road – as opposed to the grand government buildings in the centre of town occupied by the UN in Dili and the Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad.

One result of this basing decision was that the infamous white four-wheel drives are out of sight. A ‘no-fraternisation’ policy, designed to avoid prostitution and other unattractive spillover effects, has largely been followed. The Special Co-ordinators have been well known but they have worn their office lightly, without bodyguards, seals, flags of office or other paraphernalia. Most of the police have been unarmed from the first. This point should not be exaggerated: RAMSI’s presence is noticeable, especially in Honiara, where the influx of expatriates has increased certain living costs. But compared to some other international missions the profile is low.

The mission has also undertaken diligent and largely successful efforts to communicate with Solomon Islanders, starting with the use of pidgin in the mission title ‘Operation Helpem Fren’. By contrast the acronym for the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) sounded dangerously close to ‘anmi’, which in the dialect of Albanian spoken in Kosovo means ‘enemy’. One innovation has been an AusAID-funded talkback radio program called ‘Talking Truth’, which has travelled all over Solomon Islands and provided a neutral, non-political forum in which ordinary people can question senior RAMSI officials and Solomon Islands politicians on air – an entirely new experience for most local people. All this adds up to an openness and humility which is entirely appropriate for an international mission.

The future of RAMSI

Rebuilding a fragile state is a difficult task, one that cannot be achieved quickly. So far RAMSI has made good progress. It has started the country on a new trajectory. The mission will need to navigate three main challenges, however, if that course is to be maintained:

Preserve political support. Whereas the restoration of law and order served the interests of the Solomons elite, the current concentration on economic reform and clean government threatens some of those interests. Already we have seen mischief-making by some Cabinet ministers and constitutional challenges to RAMSI’s existence, and sovereignty concerns may be voiced more loudly in the lead-up to the 5 April 2006 election. For the reasons stated above it is unlikely that a future government will ask RAMSI to leave but clearly the mission will have to be very skilful in the way it works with a new government if Kemakeza is not re-elected Prime Minister.

Help Solomon Islanders address the tension’s root causes. Many of the underlying causes of the tensions – including land ownership and inter-community problems – remain unresolved. RAMSI initially took the view that it was not the mission’s job to address these issues, but rather to create space for Solomon Islanders to do it themselves. In recent months RAMSI’s view has developed as it became apparent that if it does not help to facilitate discussion on these issues it may never happen. These efforts need to accelerate once the election season is over and a new government has been elected in Honiara.
Start thinking about how to leave. Since the deployment of RAMSI the Australian Government has been at pains to stress that this is a long-term commitment. This assurance is both rare and welcome. On the other hand, an open-ended commitment would not be in anyone’s interests: not the Solomons, which needs to return to a self-sustaining state at some point; and not Australia, for which the RAMSI deployment is hugely expensive in terms of both financial and human resources. RAMSI needs to focus intensely, therefore, on two tasks where insufficient progress has been made to date: building indigenous capacity so that responsibility can be handed back within a reasonable time-frame; and setting public goals by which its own performance can be measured. Identifying the end-game is the first step towards completing it.

If RAMSI’s challenges are daunting, that only proves how difficult state-building is for the international community. These tests are common to all such international interventions, and RAMSI has met them better than most. We should hesitate before applying all of RAMSI’s lessons to other situations: it is not difficult to think of state-building efforts led by one country that are troubled, or state-building efforts led by a neighbour that are toxic. Nevertheless, RAMSI has been an innovative and pragmatic response to conditions in one small country, and the design of the mission – preventive, permissive, regionally-mandated, nationally-led, UN-supported, non-sovereign, police led and light touch – is worthy of continuing close observation. 

Dr Michael Fullilove is the Program Director for Global Issues at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney. This article is an extract from his extensively footnoted report, ‘The Testament of Solomons: RAMSI and International State Building’, published by the Institute in March 2006 and available at www.lowyinstitute.org.

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really the result of tensions among the senior intelligence staff about the vulnerability of the Nui Dat base.

I do not know whether the latter is true but I suspect not as Bob was, in fact, evacuated because of encephalitis. That this occurred just before mid August 1966 is most probably sheer coincidence.

Keith Castles
New South Wales

Sir: Thank you for publishing Commodore Jim Dickson’s moving and thoughtful eulogy from the funeral of Lieutenant Darby Allen, RAN [Defender, Summer 2005/06]. The eulogy captured the man and his moment very well.

It is very fitting that our last veteran of both the World Wars was a member of the permanent defence force rather than one of the million or so ‘for-the-duration’ enlistees. This is not to disparage for a minute the service of all those Australians who volunteered to serve their country in time of war during the 20th Century. But Darby Allen’s 34 years of service, beginning as a boy sailor soon after the birth of the Royal Australian Navy, epitomises that part of the broader history of Australian military service that is so often subsumed in public memory and literary records by Army-dominant, citizen-soldier mythology.

Michael Sable
Western Australia

Sir: I recently heard of a case where a young man, after repeatedly smoking marijuana, had ‘blown’ his brain to such an extent, that he has major mental problems. In consequence, he is now being paid a disability allowance by the Federal Government and receives heavily subsidised medical treatment.

He appears to be getting at least as much support as ADF Veterans (at least those under the age of 70) who have disabilities arising from war service. On the surface, the Government is apparently treating people with health problems arising from their breaking of the law the same as it treats those Australians who risked their lives and incurred their health problems by serving the nation.

Where is this country going? What can we do to convince politicians that our Veterans deserve better treatment than law breakers?

Duncan Spencer
New South Wales

Sir: The financial payments which some war veterans receive are compensation not social security. In particular, the designation Totally and Permanently Incapacitated (TPI) means what it says and is not lightly awarded by the Department of Veterans Affairs. To treat TPI payments as if they were general welfare payments is wrong and demeaning to the veterans involved.

Economic rationalists only interested in the fiscal repercussions of veterans’ benefits should ponder this policy’s hidden costs to overall government expenditure. The defence force has a pronounced and increasingly perpetual recruiting shortfall, and this is getting more serious.

What price should we place on the disincentive to defence force careers when potential enlistees observe that wounded or injured Service personnel, or the families of members killed, are treated as if they were merely social security recipients – and even then can actually be worse off than if they were.

Graham Halton
Tasmania

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Have you considered making a donation or bequest to the Australia Defence Association?

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The Association can assist with the provision of will or codicil forms, or referral to a solicitor. Further details may be obtained from bequests@ada.asn.au