UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT IN SOLOMON ISLANDS: A PRACTICAL MEANS TO PEACEMAKING

BY RUTH LILOQULA AND ALICE ARUHE'ETA POLLARD

Discussion Paper 00/7
PART 1: "ETHNIC TENSION": CAUSES AND IMPACT

INTRODUCTION: THE "ETHNIC TENSION"

Before the Solomon Islands were discovered by the outside world the free movement of people occurred within each island amongst people who had blood and land ties. Movement also took place outside such ties through marriages arranged by chiefs and elders and as a direct result of inter-tribal and inter-island wars, when young children were taken as spoils of war by chiefs. In other cases people were given away as part of compensation, to make lasting peace and build relationships between neighbouring islands, in particular to protect the donor group from head hunting activities. Those involved in such movements were treated with respect, taken into the host family and group as their own, and had equal rights with true members of the family and group. They often held the most prestigious positions and had important property rights. During this precolonial period the people now known as Solomon Islanders did not see themselves as one people, as belonging to one country.

Following the establishment of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate at the end of the nineteenth century, the colonisers grouped the various islands into one country and initiated social and economic development, but it was mainly confined to a few centres along the coast. During the colonial period large numbers of people were moved by those who traded in labour: within islands, from island to island, and in some cases outside the country, often against their will, to places like Samoa, Fiji, and Australia. Such population movements, beyond blood and land ties and tribal connections, were implemented by expatriate plantation owners and missions seeking plantation labourers, educators and health workers. Before and after independence the majority of people employed as labourers, both inside Solomon Islands and abroad, were from the island of Malaita. Plantation labourers on islands other than their own received no education about the cultural norms and traditions of the islands where they worked. They lived in these locations practising and maintaining their own cultures and identities and kept very much to themselves.

Before this era, Solomon Islanders had lived in their own communities and on land with which they identified. Throughout the colonial period, land ownership, cultural identity, and position within one's community, tribal group and island remained very important for people's livelihood and social well being.

Before and after independence in 1978, economic and social development was limited to the capital Honiara, on the island of Guadalcanal, and a few other, mostly coastal centres. By giving all citizens of Solomon Islands the right to move freely within the national boundaries, the new national constitution encouraged internal migration. For economic and social reasons many people migrated, especially from Malaita but also from other provinces. They went mainly to the capital and other provincial centres. The colonial and national governments also resettled victims of natural disasters, (especially the victims of the 1977 earthquake), on alienated land around Honiara. People moved outside land, blood and tribal ties, within islands, between islands and between provinces. All these factors contributed to rapid population increase in the capital and to the expansion of squatter settlements in Guadalcanal Province and to a lesser extent in other provinces.

The growth of squatter settlements in and around Honiara led to conflicts with the local Guadalcanal people. Indigenous villagers resented the acquisition of land by migrants, in particular Malaitans, whether it had occurred legally or illegally. Nor did they like the domination by migrants of businesses in and around the capital. These factors eventually led to the current ethnic tension in Guadalcanal Province, which resulted in a massive displacement and exodus of people back to their villages of origin. Residents of Guadalcanal origin in areas affected by the conflict were forced to flee to the interior; residents from other provinces were forced to return to their home provinces. For Malaita Province, the total number of returned settlers, during the peak of the tension, was estimated to be over 23,000 people, or about 4,100 families.

UNDERLYING CAUSES OF THE ETHNIC TENSION

Since independence, Solomon Islands has undergone dramatic changes and a recent period of breakdown. The development of the country has been characterised by great leaps forward
and giant steps backward. Even before the outbreak of the current ethnic tension there were signs of breakdown in community life and relationships, rising levels of crime, alienation and increasing unemployment, with growing nationwide disparities in capabilities and income. Rapid urbanisation damages human relations and contributes to the rapid exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation. The drive for material betterment has made us indifferent to our roots in nature and our cultural identity, and to our obligations to our neighbours. These changes have worsened human development problems and threaten the sustainability of progress for future generations. We are faced with big challenges to increase the access of the majority of Solomon Islanders to the economic and social services and development opportunities that can improve their living conditions within their locality. Whilst it is recognised that problems of survival demand cooperative solutions that place the common good above narrow self interest, a widening capitalistic mentality promotes the interests of individuals and the minority over groups and the majority.

In the last twenty months these changes have been more dramatic. Ethnic tension between Malaitan settlers and the indigenous people of Guadalcanal erupted throughout Guadalcanal Province. Since then the ethnic tension has spread and is now affecting the whole nation. Innocent people of other provinces have become victims. The Malaitan people too have recently become victims, as individuals and groups use the current situation to settle old grievances or simply to demand finance. Several provinces have demanded state government or political independence to register their disagreement with the manner with which the ethnic tension is being dealt. The country is in danger of tearing the cords that unite it and bind its citizens together.

The country’s leadership has been characterised by contradictions and disharmony, by confusion and uncertainty. In our quest to find a way to lasting peace, we have made significant advances but the ground gained has soon been lost. Great leaps forward were made in the peace process through payment of compensation, the signing of a Cease-fire Agreement in mid-1999 and the establishment of the Cease-fire Agreement Monitoring Council. These were counterbalanced by giant steps backward through the killing of militant patients in the hospital, the breaking of the Cease-fire Agreement, the passive role of the Cease-fire Monitoring Council and the victimising of innocent people, including Malaitans, their families and properties and anyone who spoke out against these activities.

There is a need to shift analysis beyond immediate causes and the direct participants in the current tension. The underlying causes are complex and historical and must be understood if further ethnic tension is to be prevented amongst people of the same or different provinces. A deeper understanding might provide men, women and the churches in Solomon Islands, as well as the international community, with practical means to contribute meaningfully to peacemaking, national unity and nation building. Solomon Islands needs help, but it is important that we minimise mistakes that could jeopardise well intentioned assistance.

Exploitation of natural resources and inequitable sharing of benefits

The natural forest and sea resources provide a substantial part of the basis of the subsistence economy and livelihood in Solomon Islands. They are sources of essential goods and services, such as water, material for housing and transportation, food, medicinal plants and others. In this respect, the natural forests and the sea resources are central to the economic, cultural and social well being of all Solomon Islanders. They provide benefits to the resource owners, the provincial and national governments and the private sector. They can serve as the foundation for economic growth in the context of sustainable community living and human development.

To this point, however, a large proportion of the country’s valuable natural resources has already been exhausted without contributing very much to sustainable community living and human development. The uncontrolled and insensitive exploitation of resources has brought many disadvantages and social problems for families, communities, provinces and the central government, and has weakened the linkages between them. For example, a close look at the logging industry shows that logging companies have committed several forms of malpractice through which they deprive landowners and governments of the revenues that ought to have accrued to them. Malpractices include under-reporting of log export volumes and prices; deliberate misrepresentation of tree species to place them in a lower price category; evasion of export duties. Added to this are the
significant and increasing duty remissions given to companies, especially in the period before 1996. This meant that the bulk of the profits accrued to the logging companies rather than to the landowners and the governments.

The mismanagement of public finances and inappropriate policies towards the private sector in the past decade contributed substantially to the inability of the economy of the country to grow. Most of the surplus benefits acquired through the fast depletion of vital forest assets have gone to foreign logging companies or been dissipated in private consumption of royalty payments. The country failed to capture and invest an adequate share of the rent generated from the harvest of its natural endowment. Instead economic development in the country suffered. Yet at family, community and tribal levels, the distribution of royalty payments has also caused many conflicts. With respect to the current ethnic tension, the over-exploitation of natural resources for the development of the country as a whole is an issue of contention, not only for the Guadalcanal people and Province, but for many other people and their provinces. Such resentment is worsened when they see their resources exploited by settlers and the employees of development projects without any regard for the rights and wishes of the local indigenous people, and when the state system fails to address their grievances. The demands made recently by the indigenous people of Guadalcanal have also been aired by people in other provinces, including Malaita, where local resources were exploited in the name of development. The ethnic tension that occurred in Guadalcanal Province could have happened anywhere else in the country.

In Guadalcanal Province, which received most of the internal migration, the people felt that they could no longer tolerate the threat to their social interaction and the essence of their lives. The sheer number of people moving into their province and the inability of the government to attend to their concerns made them feel that they had to act before losing everything. They saw no other way to get a fair share of the benefits from the exploitation of their resources than to take armed action against those they saw as responsible: the national government and the Malaitans resident in Guadalcanal Province.

Migration, population pressure and uneven development

The centralisation of social services and economic development began long before independence. The early missionaries centralised their stations in accessible coastal locations. This resulted in the internal migration of people from their places of origin to land belonging to other communities. In consequence, the residents of a single village may comprise up to six different tribal groups. This has caused frequent land disputes, but socially such composite Christian communities have lived together quite happily. The arrival of plantation developers during the colonial period, however, resulted in the large-scale movement of people outside their home islands.

After independence, major economic and social development continued to be focussed in Honiara and in Gizo, Auki, Lata, Kirakira, Choiseul Bay, Buala and a few other smaller government stations on land that had been acquired by the colonial administration for urban and semi-urban development. The concentration of economic opportunities, quality social development services, incentives and capacities resulted in the mass movement to these locations, especially Honiara, of people seeking better lives for themselves and their children. Some migrants were looking for jobs and what they saw as an improved standard of living. Others were avoiding the payment of compensation for some wrong committed in their island of origin. Some, especially youths, were attracted by the bright lights of the city. Some families that had moved purely for economic reasons maintained two homes, one at their place of origin and one in or around the urban centre, but in most cases migrants established permanent homes in the places where they settled. Especially on Guadalcanal, many bought land from local landowners, while still others squatted inside and outside the boundaries of the capital or provincial towns. Over time interactions occurred between migrant settlers and local people. Many migrants married locally and have lived with their families in Guadalcanal or other provinces for the last twenty to thirty years.

The expansion of squatter settlements in and around Honiara led to disagreements and much opposition from indigenous Guadalcanal people. Local villagers complained that migrants, especially Malaitans, were acquiring some of their lands illegally. It must be noted, however, that whilst some land purchases might not have been lawful, most non-indigenous settlers in Guadalcanal acquired their lands and properties through lawful means and according to local customs. Being more hard-working and competitive, migrants dominate businesses in
the capital and surrounding areas, which is also resented by many indigenous Guadalcanal people.

To resolve the present ethnic tension and avoid its recurrence in the future in Guadalcanal and elsewhere, the government needs to be able to finance and put in place infrastructure and support services that allow people to remain on their own land but still be economically viable, with access to better social development facilities and opportunities than are currently available.

**Successive failure of government policy and strategies**

Whilst it is recognised that the militant young men of Guadalcanal and Malaita Provinces are key actors in the displacement of people resulting from the current ethnic tension, to blame them entirely is to misunderstand the underlying causes. Fundamentally, the crisis is attributable to the failure of successive governments to implement effective or just policies and strategies to develop the country's human and natural resources. The processes, mechanisms, relationships and institutions through which people and groups are able to express their interests, exercise their rights and obligations, and sort out their differences have either been absent or very weak. Public resources have not been managed efficiently or problems dealt with effectively in response to people's critical needs. While most policies are based on the expected participation of the people, ordinary people have not been admitted to the consultation process, resulting in failures at the implementation stage. The principles of participation, transparency, accountability and effectiveness, which are critical to achieving sustainable use of resources, have either been ignored or inappropriately applied by institutions and organisations. The policies and strategies adopted have in many cases failed to develop the capacity for development that gives priority to rural areas, advances women, sustains the environment and creates needed opportunities.

Education, which is crucial for sustainable community living and human development, is regarded officially as a service and not as an investment. During the colonial period, the colonial government controlled leadership positions and there was general respect for authority within communities and institutions such as schools. Respect for government produced a law-abiding generation, but this group is shrinking and popular respect for the state has lost ground since independence due to a shift in policy priorities. The new state emphasis on nation building has weakened local and community governance. Local courts that deal mainly with land and other civil disputes in communities and villages are poorly manned and virtually ignored by the central government. Police patrols in villages that signal the presence of order in the rural areas have ceased. The absence of the very fabric of law and order in rural areas in Solomon Islands accounts for the way young people behave in the villages. Emphasis is placed instead on sectors such as foreign affairs, agriculture, the provincial government system, health and education – as services and not as investments. No consideration has been given to creating economic opportunities and social incentives throughout the country to provide jobs for school leavers. No employment creation policy has been put in place or even thought about.

A thorough review of the current education system coupled with incentives in rural areas would allow the decentralisation of government and ensure that it is closer to the people. Better working facilities and infrastructure such as roads, houses, classrooms, clinics and hospitals would attract highly qualified and trained personnel back to the rural areas, to implement development strategies that would create economic opportunities and access to industrial outlets for rural youth. For this to occur, good governance and democracy must first of all return to the country. Through lessons learned from the current crisis, there is opportunity to turn the tables and address these issues.

**The national constitution**

Social interaction is the essence of human life throughout Solomon Islands, as in any country. The encouragement of cultural diversity and social interaction between ethnic groups has been achieved in some provinces, but elsewhere has proved very difficult to bring about, as demonstrated by the current crisis. People lived – and in rural areas mostly still live – in complex social networks with indigenous economic systems that look after them and strengthen relationships and mutual respect between co-existing groups. Participation in community life has tremendous social value as an important source of well-being, enjoyment, fulfilment and meaning. The way in which the development of the country has taken place has not created an environment conducive to community values. No thought
was given to planning for the reinforcement of community values when groups of different origins came together due to internal migration.

In 1978 Solomon Islands gained independence from the British government. The preamble of the national constitution, the organic law of Solomon Islands, states:

We the people of Solomon Islands, proud of the wisdom and the worthy customs of our ancestors, mindful of our common and diverse heritage and conscious of our common destiny, do now, under the guiding hand of God, establish the sovereign democratic State of Solomon Islands’. One of the “Fundamental Rights and Freedoms of the Individual” guaranteed by the constitution is “the right to move freely throughout Solomon Islands, and] ... reside in any part (Section 14).

After independence the movement of people to the capital and other provincial centres increased dramatically, as a direct result of this new constitutional right. There have recently been calls for the review and amendment of the national constitution in the light of the current crisis. However, before this is done there needs to be an understanding throughout the country as to how the organic law contributed to the ethnic tension. If this is achieved, it may not be necessary to amend or change the constitution.

The major contribution of the national constitution to the ethnic tension stems from the preamble and its interpretation, which require general rethinking by all Solomon Islanders. The government, its institutions and organisations, civil society and its organisations and institutions, the private sector, men and women and the churches must all be involved in rethinking the preamble. In many ways the ethnic tension results from the many different interpretations placed on it and on Section 14, which grants freedom of movement. There must be justice before true peace can be achieved. Many people met by the Women for Peace Group (see below) in its work during the crisis did not discuss land, migration, or the lack of economic opportunities and incentives as the causes of the ethnic tension. From the viewpoint of Guadalcanal people, men, women and militants alike, land is not the main issue but is used to draw attention to their real grievance: the imposition on them of another island’s traditions, customs and laws by settlers who use the national constitution to justify imposing their own ways and not respecting the customs and property of the host province. Many Guadalcanal people claim that when they opposed such cultural impositions they were ignored, harassed, threatened and at times murdered. They say that this is the real cause of their disagreement with Malaitan settlers.

An example of what happens in the island of Choiseul further illustrates the need for reinterpretation of the preamble of the constitution. In Choiseul, there are four main cultural groups. Each has its own norms that govern people’s property, such as land and other resources, and the general movement of people within Choiseul, as well as movement after marriage. In all such movements, the guiding principle is respect for all people and their property. Exchange of wealth objects is used to strengthen relationships between people, not weaken them. When a woman or a man marries and settles in her or his own area, she or he knows the norms of the community. It is the duty of the resident partner in a marriage to educate the newcomer and his or her people about local customs. Once married and settled the couple is expected to comply fully with the customs of the area in which they settle. It is the responsibility of both parents as well as the community in which they live to teach the children about the customs of both sides. People who migrate or move to another place are expected to adopt the customs and traditions of the village in which they settle. They are not allowed to impose upon others their own ways and customs. They are at the same time not prevented from being themselves as long as they do so with respect.

It might therefore not be necessary to amend the constitution, but to interpret it to take account of each province’s customs and traditions. This will ensure that migrants do not try to impose their own customs on their hosts, and should be legalised and enforced to achieve social integration. People in many provinces throughout the country have voiced this sentiment, not just the people of Guadalcanal.

Lack of national unity

Since we became one country, Solomon Islanders have yet to accept each other as one people. This situation has been ongoing, but we have ignored it in our efforts to remain united, focussing on the good and positive small things that happen and burying the big issue as if it does not exist. The situation was further aggravated by the widespread feeling that some ethnic groups were imposing their norms and culture on others, and failing to respect the other’s culture, property rights and community living environment. It was probably only a
matter of time before some kind of ethnic tension exploded. The situation is worst in Guadalcanal Province, where there has been mass immigration, compared with other provinces. The eruption of ethnic tension came as no surprise, but the means by which the Guadalcanal people expressed their resentment shook the nation and perhaps the region. It may, however, be a blessing in disguise that the conflict happened now and not later, when its impact and the victimising of people from other provinces would probably have been far worse.

The widely expressed wish for the provinces to be given state governments shows the depth of separatist feelings. If the country is to remain united, hard work will be needed to bond people in a common cause that enables them to accept each other as one people and feel good about each other. At the moment this aspect of nation building and national unity is missing. The fundamental issues that need to be addressed in this respect include sorting out the purpose and benefits of being one country, making proper allowance for the wide range of cultural value systems, identities, practices, norms and traditions, and working out how they relate to the environment, resources and property. We also need to establish through broadly participatory processes where culture and cultural identity feature in national unity and nation building. Whilst educated people may have some ideas about the purpose of being one nation, the vast majority of Solomon Islanders see the nation state as a threat to their resources, their cultural identity and culture, their environment and the basis of their sustained community living. We need to sort out whose agenda it is to be one country, and recognise the need to discuss the question widely and in its entirety, rather than on a piecemeal basis. The desire for peace can drive people to unite, but without an in-depth analysis of the fundamental causes of ethnic conflicts, there can be no lasting peace in Solomon Islands. Everyone has a role in this important work, including donors and the international community. It is time for the country to look beyond the issues of compensation and land. It is time to spend more effort and resources on reinterpreting the preamble of the constitution in terms of understanding each other’s cultures and creating broadly based, nationwide economic opportunities and incentives which enhance the capacities of all people and provinces.

EFFECTS AND IMPACT OF THE ETHNIC TENSION

The ethnic tension in Guadalcanal Province resulted twenty months ago in a massive exodus back to their places of origin of people from other provinces who had been living in areas controlled by Guadalcanal Province. The majority of these people were from Malaita Province and their displacement had a huge impact not only on the displaced families, but on the communities of both Provinces. Following the attempted coup of 5 June 2000, civil unrest became a national problem that threatened the cords that bind the country. It affected the ability of the government and the private sector to provide the basic services that sustain community living and human development. The coup attempt also saw people from other provinces who had lived and worked in the capital forced to return to their places of origin. People from Rennell and Bellona, Western, and Temotu Provinces had to flee the capital, their jobs and properties as they became targets of the civil unrest. Civilians who spoke out against criminal activities committed within the city were beaten up and had their property stolen in front of their children.

Business houses and individuals were continually harassed. Many businesses closed and stopped making new orders for the basic goods needed by residents and people all over the Solomons. They were no longer able to cope with the demands for cash and the harassment of their workers and families by criminal elements. Within Guadalcanal Province many local people as well as people from other provinces were left with no homes and in many cases no clothes as their houses and properties were burned, looted and destroyed. Foreign governments evacuated their citizens because their security could no longer be guaranteed. In so doing, they effectively suspended or cancelled assistance to the country, especially that which directly benefited women, children and the disadvantaged. These drastic and justified actions taken by foreign governments to ensure the safety of their citizens meant that sanctions were indirectly imposed on the country. Within a week, the economy collapsed.

The civil unrest thus affected the business sector, the organisations of civil society and the public sector, throughout the entire country. This in turn had an adverse effect on the delivery of services – hospitals, clinics, schools and water supply – to those who needed them
most: women, children and elderly people – the innocent and silent majority. As the private sector sent its workers home or on unpaid leave, for reasons of safety as well as finance, the main sources of government revenue dried up. As the government is unable to raise enough finance to pay public servants, they are being sent back to their provinces on unpaid leave. This has meant that the state cannot deliver basic social services. The suffering of the innocent would have been worse but for the emergency assistance given by donors. This assistance is now targeted at meeting humanitarian and urgent development needs in the provinces; at helping to ensure that vulnerable groups continue to have basic service delivery; and at conflict resolution and peace building.

The current government tried to resolve the political problem by paying compensation to allow the peace process to take place, but the size of the demands made by those who had been most active in the disruption was economically disastrous. To register their disagreement with the situation, several provinces called for state government or political independence, pushing the country to the brink of dissolution. In this conflict, women, children, old people and the innocent are the most affected but civil society organisations have contributed powerfully to help the community deal with the disaster. Their role needs to be supported. Yet while it is important to deal with the immediate impact of the crisis, in the long term it is not enough merely to address the effects. The causes of the ethnic tension must now be the major focus in order to prevent its recurrence.
PART 2: THE “WOMEN FOR PEACE” ANALYSIS AND APPROACH

GENDER AND CONFLICT IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

Conflict is not a new phenomenon in the Solomon Islands. It has existed between and within the various indigenous societies since human beings first settled the islands. People have lived with conflicts all their lives. Women and men have been part and parcel of conflicts. They were creators, challengers and victims of conflict, and mediators and peacemakers in conflict. Conflict in Solomon Islands manifested itself in various forms and operated at different levels: first, at the family level, for example, between brothers, between brothers and sisters, between sisters, and between husband and wife; second, at the tribal level; third, at the level of language groups or whole islands, for example Guadalcanal people fighting against Malaitans. It is argued that conflict was, is and will be an ongoing activity. Conflicts in the past were expressed through verbal abuse, such as exchange of insults or swearing: through body contacts, such as sexual abuse and using the fists; and with weapons like stone or wooden axes and spears. Since Solomon Islanders came in contact with the outside world, weapons produced by industrial technology, such as metal axes and knives, have been introduced and used. Today, as in the current ethnic tension, modern firearms are used. The regular occurrence of conflict has given women and men in Solomon Islands the experience, knowledge and skills to design methods to deal with and resolve it in a manner that is fair and responsive to the type of conflict, the culture and the environment.

Despite the numerous past conflicts in Solomon Islands, it is important to note that the current so-called “ethnic conflict” is different and new in nature. The use of high-powered modern weapons makes it life threatening and its impact at all levels of governance in the nation has been disastrous. Compensation processes have been designed by a third party, which the participants themselves organised the exchange of compensation. The peace processes have been guided by the perpetrators with little input from the victims. The current tension has created new challenges for Solomon Islanders to redesign conflict resolution procedures and redirect the way ahead to restore and maintain national unity.

The roles women have played in the current ethnic tension are traced back to women’s hands-on skills, experience and responsibilities, their good knowledge of cultural values and their firm belief in the importance of biblical principles in responding to conflict. Women have expertise in their own right. The core value of motherliness, which links culture and Christianity, has equipped women to respond appropriately in conflicts in the past, and is still highly relevant today. The principles upon which women as mothers mobilise culture and Christianity to resolve conflicts are outlined here.

First, a woman in Melanesia and thus in Solomon Islands is a peacemaker in her own right. She is blessed with natural, God-given qualities such as love, care, peace, patience, humility and sensitivity. These values make women different from men. Women’s various contributions and responsibilities in the areas of production, reproduction, community work and leadership, family welfare and nation building do not demand conflict. Women’s commitment to ensuring sustenance and livelihood for the family, the community and the nation is a driving force towards good governance and prosperity. As mothers of the nation, women are willing and committed to offer their gifts, time and wisdom to find lasting peace for their nation and their children.

Second, different cultures in Solomon Islands provide for women and men to participate in conflict resolution in different ways. For example, in the Areare culture it is imperative that women and men have a good knowledge of their cultural values and the norms essential for living. If a conflict arises within a family, a tribe or a community, women and men play various negotiating and peacemaking roles. Women intervene in conflict using their clothes, words and body contact. A woman can stand between two warring parties and challenge them by uttering such words as: “enough is enough, stop fighting, if you continue to fight after my words, you have walked over my legs”. This is a powerful threat, since in the Areare cultural

1 “Swearing” means to say things that will hurt people, especially anything relating to parts of the body or to ancestral spirits
context it is tambu, "forbidden", for a male to make contact with or step over a woman’s body, especially those to whom he is related by kinship or marriage. Any such transgression requires compensation, or worse in the case of in-laws or sisters. The warring parties should stop fighting immediately a woman swears in this manner, and guidelines for reconciliation and compensation should at once begin to apply.

Third, from a Christian perspective the Bible also provides for women’s role in conflict. The example of Abigail in 1 Samuel 25:1-44 highlights the role Abigail played in bringing about peace for her nation against King David’s army through face to face dialogue and sharing of food. Similar biblical examples, such as Queen Esther and Miriam, are also appropriate. Thus the motherly nature of women in the contexts of culture and Christianity demonstrates peaceful, non-violent methods whereby women can help resolve conflict. These methods have enabled women in Solomon Islands to contribute in various ways to bringing about peace in the current crisis.

THE WOMEN FOR PEACE GROUP

The ethnic tension and violence in Guadalcanal now affecting Solomon Islanders throughout the country has affected women and children the most. The inability of the central government to provide security and basic social services to provinces not directly involved in the present conflict has also threatened and weakened the cords that bind the country. In May 2000 women in Honiara held a round table discussion resulting in the issue of the Women’s Communiqué on Peace, which outlines activities women set for themselves in order to contribute constructively and meaningfully to the peace process. Following the attempted military coup of 5 June 2000 and an analysis of the worsening relationship between the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) and Guadalcanal’s Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), women with ability and commitment organised as mothers to mobilise leaders, women and the general populace to put their thoughts and efforts together towards resolving the ethnic tension. The annexation of the law enforcement body in the capital by the MEF was in effect the biggest hostage-taking episode in the whole history of Solomon Islands, if not the world. It has defied the current methods and mechanisms for conflict resolution designed by and for the people of Solomon Islands and has created new challenges for them. It was realised that something had to be done and the volunteer “Women for Peace Group” was formed with the general objective that women should contribute to the peace process in their capacity as mothers of the nation.

The Women for Peace Group consists of women of all ages resident in Honiara, from all religious denominations, from all walks of life and from every province. It includes the sisters of the Catholic Church and the Church of Melanesia. The group is committed to working for peace with sensitivity, on a voluntary basis, and takes a motherly approach in carrying out its activities. The group is independent of any political, religious and ethnic movements and welcomes voluntary support from all committed women of Solomon Islands. The group takes a neutral stand in working towards the restoration of peace in Solomon Islands. As neutrals, members have a mission to participate in the peace process in one way or another, in any form and at any time, working in collaboration with the MEF/paramilitary group, the IFM, the churches, non-government organisations (NGOs), community leaders, chiefs, the Solomon Islands Government and the international community.

The overall objective of the program of “Women for Peace” is active and effective support and encouragement of women’s initiatives at the grassroots level, as well as at higher levels, in the search for a peaceful solution to the political crisis in the country. Its major aim is to convince the warring parties to lay down their arms to enable the restoration of peace, the return of law and order, and the renewal of good governance and democracy in Solomon Islands. The group’s underlying principle is: “God himself is the Prince of Peace. When members have God in their lives, they have peace in their hearts, peace in their minds and peace in their hands. They will then be able to give peace to others”.

Since starting its work the group has encouraged various sectors within the government and the community to work together and settle differences and problems at a negotiation table. The group has also made contact with various government officials in order to brief them on the group’s objectives and planned activities, discuss matters of concern, and contribute to the peace process by making positive suggestions. The main message is that to have peace within yourself enhances your ability to give peace to others. The group also shares the particular difficulties of women
from Guadalcanal and Malaita with respect to the ethnic tension. It encourages and supports them to take the active and leading role in the group's activities.

**Main purposes**

- To build trust and confidence in the leaders and members of the two militant groups by listening to them, exchange of views on various issues relating to the tension, and creating mutual understanding. To use the trust and confidence established to persuade the militant groups to meet and dialogue in an attempt to restore peace in the country.

- To convince the fighting parties to lay down their arms, thus paving the way for the restoration of democracy and good governance in Solomon Islands.

- To make known to the militants, their leaders and the Government the impact of the tension on children, mothers and other vulnerable groups.

- To share women's views on the issues of compensation, law and order and security, and the need for the politicians to be united and work together.

- To build trust and confidence with the provincial governments of Malaita and Guadalcanal.

- To mobilise women, chiefs, elders, village leaders, parliamentarians, provincial members, church leaders, and the representatives of foreign governments to unite, lead and speak with one voice, the voice of peace and reconciliation.

- To share fellowship with the victims of the tension.

- To meet government leaders and share with them women's perspectives on the tension, and to offer women's assistance towards the peace process.

- To alert foreign development partners to the need for their continued assistance especially in building up the confidence of the police force and in supervising the laying down of arms.

**Activities and strategies**

In working to fulfil its purposes and objectives, the Women for Peace Group has carried out various activities at different levels, in consultation with relevant organisations. They include:

- Meetings with the militants and their leaders: various meetings were conducted with the leaders of both militant groups on issues and concerns raised by women, such as law and order, good governance, peace, and the consequences of the tension for the lives of children and mothers. Visits were also made to the various camps of both militant groups, during which activities were conducted such as prayers, sharing from God's word, offering words of advice from mothers, and sharing food with the militants.

- Meetings with the highest decision-making bodies: prior to the election of the new Prime Minister, the group was able to meet with the Governor General, the clerk to the parliament and the acting Commissioner of Police. Specific issues were discussed with the appropriate authority: for example, law and order with the Commissioner of Police; the role of women during the prime ministerial election with the clerk to the parliament; the women's plea for peace meeting with the Governor General. After the election of the new Prime Minister the group held two meetings with him, the Minister for Police and Justice, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Special Secretary. Issues such as law and order, the laying down of arms, and peace were shared with them.

- Women's plea for peace: a special service was organised by the group to launch their plea for peace to the nation and in particular to all leaders throughout the Solomon Islands, the democratically elected parliamentarians, the Government leaders, the Leader of the Opposition and the foreign diplomatic missions working in Honiara. The Women's Appeal for Peace called for all to unite and lead the nation in this time of crisis, putting aside their individual agendas and political affiliation. The plea contained twelve key areas and was broadcast live to the whole nation. This event took place before the election of the new Prime Minister.

- Meeting with police officers: a special meeting was held with a few of the police officers at Rove, in Honiara, encouraging them to be courageous and take their stand on the job they were trained to provide. At this meeting there were also prayers and sharing of God's word, words of wisdom from mothers, and food.

- Visits to the displaced: members of the group were able to visit the displaced families of the Marau community accommodated at the Panatina Pavilion; the displaced families of the Reef Islands community of Rifle Range accommodated at the prison compound; and the affected families of the Mataniko community. Activities conducted during these visits included singing, prayers, sharing of God's word, sharing of food and other necessities such as clothes, soap and nappies. The highlight of these visits was the building of relationships on a one-to-one basis.
Hospital visit: following unpleasant incidents that took place in the hospital, members of the Women for Peace Group visited the hospital, conducting prayers, singing and sharing God’s word to build confidence and bring back some normality to patients and hospital workers. The group was able to donate soap, toilet paper and baby’s clothes to the hospital. Women were able to meet with patients on a one-to-one basis.

Organised basket exchange: this activity was spearheaded, organised and supervised by the Catholic sisters. Women of Honiara were able to exchange essential goods with women of Guadalcanal both to the west and the east of Honiara. A Honiara woman’s basket would contain items such as rice, taiyo (canned tuna), noodles, soap, kerosene, matches, salt and sugar, while a Guadalcanal woman’s basket would contain food such as potatoes, cassava, vegetables, fruits and betel nut. The main aim of this activity is to be at one with the women of Guadalcanal and slowly build back their confidence to bring their market produce into the capital and get essential goods.

Weekly prayer meetings: women gather for a weekly prayer meeting at the YWCA every Wednesday at 8 a.m. and finish any time they wish. In these sessions, women target their prayers on areas identified by the group. This is to ensure that the power of the prayers is focussed. The different denominations take turns in leading the prayer meetings.

Forums and conferences: the Women for Peace Group was represented at a forum organised by the NGOs and made an appeal for peace during the launching of their Peace Program. In addition the Women for Peace Group was instrumental in organising the National Peace Conference organised by the Solomon Islands Christian Association (SICA). Papers on “Good Governance” and “Migration” were presented by two members of the group at this important conference, which was attended by representatives of civil society and held on the New Zealand frigate Te Kaha.

Ceasefire talks: the Women for Peace Group was also represented at the ceasefire talks between the Government, the MEF and the IFM. These women were able to mingle with the militants and the leaders in any way they could, such as by welcoming people and serving tea. In these ways they were able to share their views and opinions on matters under discussion by the three parties. This was done with a smile, friendliness, respect, fun, love and care.

Provincial tours: members of the Women for Peace Group have carried out and will continue to conduct provincial tours to Malaita and Guadalcanal Provinces. Visits to other provinces are also planned, but the priority for the group at this point in time is to visit the women of Guadalcanal and Malaita Provinces. The visits already made were organised so that group members were able to listen to the communities, dialogue in their own language and gain an awareness of the impact of the tension. The visiting women also appealed to communities to address the issue in ways appropriate to their level within the nation, and appealed to each mother and parent to do what they can to bring their children away from the militant groups.

Rehabilitation of militants: visits to provincial communities also targeted the long-term rehabilitation of the militants back to their families. The Women for Peace Group believes that there is a need to strengthen the bonds between the boys involved in the civil unrest and their families. The main message is to make known to these boys that we as mothers still love them and are waiting for them to come home. The group also believes that the communities need to accept these boys back and do what they can to reintegrate them once they return. Isolating them will only strengthen their linkages with the militants.

Uniform symbolising national unity: members of the Women for Peace Group wear a uniform of scarves made from green, yellow or blue material, representing the national flag. In this context, yellow represents peace, green represents life and blue represents love. The message in wearing the colours separately is to tell the nation that through this crisis it is being torn apart and that it is our vision, hope and wish that the country will be united again. Our work is to contribute to a peace that will unite Solomon Islands again as a peaceful place. In this context, women have united Solomon Islands through marriage, and in our culture this means uniting blood nationally.

In their various visits and other activities, members of the Women for Peace Group listen to the views of women, community leaders, chiefs, militants, provincial governments on both sides, church leaders and ordinary people on the street. The information thus received has helped the group in the work it set out to do. Information is kept confidential and is always presented in a positive manner. Visiting and sharing with such a wide spectrum of the citizens of Solomon Islands have also given the group a deeper understanding of the fundamental causes of the ethnic tension.
“Women for Peace” have donated willingly and lovingly from their own pockets and wardrobe. They have dug deep into their baskets. Because the work they continue to perform is so highly valued, communities continue to donate funds to meet their transport and communication expenses. Members of the group have carried out their activities, utilising non-violent and peaceful methods to inform and to make their voice, opinions and views heard by the different groups concerned and the various decision-making authorities. The group has been able to dialogue with people at very different levels, from displaced families to the Prime Minister. The group’s representations of women’s issues and perspectives have generally been well received.

The challenge that women are setting and that the whole nation should be concerned about is whether these non-violent methods are effective in an armed conflict such as the current one in Solomon Islands. The Women for Peace Group believes that these methods have worked in cultural and Biblical contexts and that they can contribute to the way forward in the present crisis. The group believes that such methods will be crucial to sustainable community living and human development, but that peace must be achieved first, and that work towards peace must be started now by all men, women and churches.

ANALYSIS OF WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN FINDING PEACE AND IN THE PEACE PROCESS

Some general observations can be made about the participation of women in the peace process and in finding a lasting solution to the current social unrest. It is clear that to bring about social integration while encouraging cultural diversity will be a hard task in Solomon Islands. The Women for Peace Group believes that these methods have worked in cultural and Biblical contexts and that they can contribute to the way forward in the present crisis. The group believes that such methods will be crucial to sustainable community living and human development, but that peace must be achieved first, and that work towards peace must be started now by all men, women and churches.

During the last twenty months Solomon Islanders have wrecked their country’s economy directly through their involvement in the current ethnic tension and indirectly by being silent about the economic impact of the crisis. In year 2001 Solomon Islands will be fighting for the survival of their children and the future generations of the nation. It is estimated that an amount of SI$188 million will be raised by the government in 2001, of which SI$168 million will be required for debt servicing with only about SI$20 million left to fund services. Given this situation for the next three years, aid from donor countries will have to finance all government investment and recurrent expenditure.

It is important that those managing future assistance ensure that aid does not produce any more mistakes that will lead to further conflict. In the past, the main priority of donors has not always been economic growth, but has rather been to address the effects of economic exploitation – it seems that we have to do damage to our environment or our relationships in order to justify spending money on them. For relief and rehabilitation to work, donor assistance needs to be carefully aimed at sound
economic management at all levels within the government machinery, the private sector and civil society. In the past, even when development has been the goal of donor assistance, mismanagement has been frequent. Big donors like to finance big conspicuous projects and fail to notice the needs of the multitude of the people. Aid projects must also be properly appraised and monitored to ensure that they are sustainable and do not duplicate the work of others. More importantly, good economic policies are needed to make aid work for the benefit of the country and its citizens. Above all, these policies need to be soundly administered.

Outside assistance therefore needs to address the underlying causes of the ethnic tension. Donors must help Solomon Islanders promote national unity and nation building by creating opportunities and incentives throughout the country to enable people to remain on their own land, in their own locality, and still be economically viable. Aid needs to expand and increase people's capacities and capabilities. Donors, along with governments and bureaucracies within Solomon Islands, need to take into account that concentration of economic and political power may lead to non-sustainable policies at the expense of natural systems upon which the poor rely.

It is also critical to acknowledge in all this that a sense of belonging is an important source of personal fulfilment, well-being, enjoyment, purpose and meaning.
CONCLUSION

Ruth Liloqula
and
Alice Pollard

The current conflict between migrants and landowners demonstrates the importance of addressing the complex problems of urbanisation. Approximately 48% of the population is under the age of 14 years and about 75% of the population is under 30 years. With only 2.4% of the population over 55 years of age, many children and young people, especially in urban centres, are without the guidance of old people. The transmission of knowledge and wisdom to the younger generation has always been a very important part of community living, culture and general socialisation in Solomon Islands. Many children brought up in urban areas have fewer opportunities to learn customary norms and practices or the language of the place(s) of origin of their parents. The relatively smaller number of adults faces a great deal of pressure as income earners who provide for the basic needs of the children, the extended families and the young people. The children of inter-marriages are experiencing a new family structure. This in itself presents a profound cultural and social problem for many young urban people. A growing number of young people and children have less security – less land security and less emotional security.

Outside threats, on the one hand, and on the other hand leadership, and shared culture, ethnicity, language and religion provide the glue that helps a social system cohere. Our experience in Solomon Islands has demonstrated that such factors either combined or by themselves are not enough in dealing with internal armed conflict, because in such circumstances they encourage loyalty to subnational units, such as provinces or islands, rather than to the nation. In the absence of a unifying national ideology or a perceived outside threat to the nation, the internal pressures caused by failure of government policies and strategies, high unemployment and ethnic conflict, lead inexorably to social disintegration. We have turned on ourselves and are tearing ourselves apart on the basis of ethnicity and perceived privilege. A situation of fractured, multi-polar interests has unfolded which has now placed great strains on the system of governance. Because the institutions of national governance are weak and less durable, the ethnic tension has erupted through society's thin crust. With the disappearance of law and order, criminal elements are now running riot.

Religion and culture in the past have often had a humanising effect on society because they emphasise ethical values and concerns for the well-being of other people in the country. However, the circumstances of the current crisis have given momentum to ethnic separatism. When only a small minority benefits from economic growth, while more than 80% of the people experience real-wage reductions, ordinary people look for easily identifiable scapegoats. For most of the young people involved in the ethnic tension, ethnicity has served as a convenient means of allocating blame and gathering allies. The churches, women and men must reach mutual understanding and agreement concerning the best means to deal quickly and effectively with the profound threat posed by the ethnic tension to the well-being of the people of the country as a whole, and to seek practical means for making peace. In resolving internal armed conflict of this nature, outside assistance is a must. On behalf of the Women for Peace Group, we make this appeal for peace.

NOTE: The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Women for Peace Group or the Ministry of Human Resources and Development and National Planning.
SSGM Discussion Paper Series

96/1: Peter Larmour, Research on Governance in Weak States in Melanesia
96/2: Peter Larmour, Models of Governance and Development Administration
96/3: David Ambrose, A Coup that Failed? Recent Political Events in Vanuatu
97/1: Sinclair Dinnen, Law, Order and State in Papua New Guinea
97/2: Tomasi Vakatora, Traditional Culture and Modern Politics
97/3: 'I Futa Helu, Tradition and Good Governance
97/4: Stephanie Lawson, Cultural Traditions and Identity Politics: Some Implications for Democratic Governance in Asia and the Pacific
97/5: Peter Larmour, Corruption and Governance in the South Pacific
97/6: Satish Chand, Ethnic Conflict, Income Inequality and Growth in Independent Fiji
97/7: Sam Alasia, Party Politics and Government in Solomon Islands
97/8: Penelope Schoeffel, Myths of Community Management: Sustainability, the State and Rural Development in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu
97/9: Philip Tepahae, Chiefly Power in Southern Vanuatu
98/1: John Haglelam, Traditional Leaders and Governance in Melanesia
98/2: Binayak Ray, Good Governance: Administrative Reform and Socioeconomic Realities: A South Pacific Perspective
98/3: Eric Wittersheim, Melanesia Élites and Modern Politics in New Caledonia and Vanuatu
98/5: Peter Larmour, Making Sense of Good Governance
98/6: Bronwen Douglas, Traditional Individuals? Gendered Negotiations of Identity, Christianity and Citizenship in Vanuatu
98/7: Raymond Apthorpe, Bougainville Reconstruction Aid: What are the Issues?
99/1: John Rivers, Formulating Policy for Community Relations Programs
99/2: Lissant Bolt on, Chief Willie Bongmatur Maldo and the Incorporation of Chiefs in the Vanuatu State
99/3: Eugene Ogan, The Bougainville Conflict: Perspectives from Naisi
99/4: Grace Molisa and Elise Huffer, Governance in Vanuatu: In Search of the Nakamal Way
00/1: Peter Larmour, Issues and Mechanisms of Accountability: Examples from Solomon Islands
00/2: Bronwen Douglas (ed), Women and Governance from the Grassroots in Melanesia
00/3: Bronwen Douglas, Weak States and Other Nationalisms: Emerging Melanesian Paradigms?
00/4: Philip Hughes, Issues of Governance in Papua New Guinea: Building Roads and Bridges
00/5: KJ Crossland, The Ombudsman Role: Vanuatu’s Experiment
00/6: Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, Beyond Ethnicity: The Political Economy of the Guadalcanal Crisis in Solomon Islands

State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
AUSTRALIA

Convenor: David Hegarty
Phone: +61 2 6249 4145
Fax: +61 2 6249 5525
Email: dhegarty@coombs.anu.edu.au

Administrator: Monica Wehner
Phone: +61 2 6279 8394
Fax: +61 2 6249 5525
Email: ssgm@coombs.anu.edu.au

http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia