The ethnic conflict which erupted in the small South Pacific nation of Solomon Islands[i] in late 1998 resulted in the loss of over 100 lives, the displacement of 30,000 people, the overthrow of an elected government, and severe damage to the country’s economy and polity.

Actual fighting took place only in and around the capital, Honiara, and in other parts of Guadalcanal between militant groups from Guadalcanal and from the neighbouring island of Malaita. Fighting was initiated by Guadalcanalese youth who believed that immigrant Malaitans had taken their land without proper compensation, were denying them job opportunities, and had been disrespectful of their culture. [ii]

But the conflict impacted on Solomon Islands as a whole such that the country is now on the verge of bankruptcy, its government is unable to deliver services and relies on cash handouts as a proxy for governing, the police force is compromised and divided, the lack of reintegration of militarised and disaffected gangs of youth continues to threaten community relations already traumatised by the conflict, and most Provinces which make up the Solomons are demanding either separate statehood or independence.

### Peace Agreement

A peace process, facilitated initially by the governments of Australia and New Zealand with support from the Commonwealth Secretariat, has helped bring some degree of order to Solomons and has provided a focus for reconciliation and rehabilitation. In October 2000, following preliminary peace talks in Solomons, combatants from both sides along with national and provincial government representatives were flown to Townsville in northern Australia to negotiate a peace agreement.

The Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA), as it became known, took over a week to negotiate and was a flawed document in a number of ways, particularly in its exclusion of civil society from the deliberations and in its unrealistic expectations of the development and job-creation projects that might be introduced into Malaita and Guadalcanal. But, importantly, the TPA succeeded in two major respects - it

(a) ended the hostilities between the combatants, and

(b) provided a coherent framework for the peace process by establishing two peace monitoring bodies -

- the Peace Monitoring Council (PMC) comprising eminent and professional Solomon Islanders (including ex-combatants from both sides) to monitor and “enforce” the Agreement, and

- an International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT) to work in support of the PMC and to lead on disarmament and confidence-building activities.

### The Peace Monitoring Council

The PMC has provided indigenous leadership for the peace process. It meets regularly in
Honiara, its members participate in a host of community conferences and school presentations and travel to remoter communities across Guadalcanal and Malaita. It runs a vigorous media campaign educating the public about the terms of the TPA and reminding parties to the agreement of their obligations, particularly that of handing-in their weapons to the IPMT. Despite the wording of the Agreement, the PMC has no “enforcement” authority. It must rely on persuasion and its status as a neutral organisation to cajole recalcitrant parties into complying with their obligations under the Agreement.

Ten PMC Monitoring posts are located at various population centres and in areas of previous militant activity. Monitoring teams comprise full-time employees (replaced after several months service) drawn from local communities and include chiefs, teachers, clerics, youth workers, and (recently) women’s representatives. Following initial difficulties with the selection of Monitors and supply of rations and equipment, these PMC teams have become useful community contact points and are regularly called upon to facilitate and/or mediate in disputes between individuals, families and communities.

**International Peace Monitoring Team**

The IPMT is a civilian-led, unarmed, neutral, multi-national and multi-disciplinary organisation with personnel drawn from Australian and New Zealand police and defence forces, civilian government departments, and from the police forces of Pacific Islands nations including Vanuatu, the Cook Islands and Tonga. The Commonwealth Secretariat has attached a Monitor to the team and the United Nations is planning a similar attachment later in 2001. Currently the IPMT has 49 Monitors. There is an expectation, flowing from the Townsville talks, that the IPMT will be engaged in its work for no less than two years.

The IPMT’s major role is to collect and store weapons (i.e. its disarmament function) and to build confidence between the parties to the TPA and amongst the community more widely. It has no enforcement authority and relies on persuasion and building community trust to secure weapons’ hand-overs.[iii]

IPMT leaders participate in the PMC executive meetings and its six teams (four on Guadalcanal and two on Malaita) work in tandem with the PMC Monitoring posts as well as with local-level civil society organisations involved in reconciliation, including the (Anglican) Church of Melanesia’s Brothers and Sisters. Teams provide a physical presence by patrolling to all parts of their areas of operation – on foot or by boat – and developing strong linkages to schools, churches, women’s organisations, provincial officials and former militants. Facilitating community meetings and seminars between groups seeking to reconcile, between faction leaders, and between ex-militants and government representatives has become an important part of the IPMT’s work.

Both PMC and IPMT report regularly on breaches of the agreement (usually the public carriage or discharge of weapons by ex-militants) and on breaches of the peace which in most instances are criminal acts of theft, damage to property, assault and intimidation, committed on some but not all occasions by ex-militants. The availability of guns, alcohol and drugs has contributed to a rising level of crime. Both sets of Monitors have had to exercise care in remaining neutral and impartial, in not attempting a “policing” role (despite a community-wide expectation that they do so), and in not being drawn in to a “quasi-government” or service delivery role in the absence of regular government.

**Results**

The results of the monitoring effort almost 12 months on from the TPA’s signing have been encouraging. Weapons handed in to the IPMT number just over 1,000. None of the weapons storage containers (located in various areas of Guadalcanal and Malaita) have been tampered with. Community confidence is being re-built. Observers claim a higher level of peace and
harmony in the country than at any point in the previous three years. IPMT and PMC have had a “circuit-breaker” effect, for example, in facilitating access by out-groups (in one case, the paramilitary police, who participated in the overthrow of the government in 2000) to the debates on the peace process. Both groups of Monitors are in demand to facilitate and attend meetings with organisers appreciating that trouble is unlikely with their being present. Elements of civil society have felt more able to voice their concerns and increase their involvement in reconciliation and rehabilitation strategies for post-conflict Solomons.

But despite this progress, the peace process remains fragile. Compliance with the disarmament provisions of the TPA has not been total. Over 500 modern weapons remain unaccounted for – some being held illegally by the police, some still in the hands of the militants and their core followers, some in the hands of key political players, and others with criminal elements. Factionalism amongst the TPA parties and dissatisfaction with the apparent lack of a “peace dividend” in cash or development, are increasingly evident. The lack of credibility of the SI Government, its general inability to govern and the charge of corrupt practices hanging over it, have generated further tensions. With this in mind the PMC has called a meeting of the Parties to the TPA in mid-September to review the Agreement and to examine areas of compliance and implementation that require additional effort. This review, together with the holding of a national election in December, is expected to breathe new life into the peace process in Solomon Islands.

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[ii] Solomon Islands is a former British Protectorate which became independent in 1978. Its 380,000 ethnically diverse, Melanesian people speak over 80 different languages and live on six main and a scatter of smaller islands. Its major exports are fish, timber and copra.


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