During the Tensions
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After the first rays of dawn struck the tarmac of Solomon Islands Henderson International Airport on Thursday 24 July 2003, hundreds of soldiers, police and civilians from Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu stepped out from planes. Eventually totalling over two thousand personnel, these security forces came not in anger but rather with smiles and as friends determined to assist a neighbour who was in need. In what was to become a successful experiment in regional cooperation, RAMSI - the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands – “helpem fren” (help a friend) was born.

The fundamental objective of RAMSI was to help the Solomon Islands lay the foundations for long-term stability, security and prosperity – through supporting and improvement of the rule of law, justice and security; for more effective, accountable and democratic government; for stronger, broad-based economic growth; and for enhanced service delivery, after fighting began in 1998 between rival militants of Guadalcanal and the neighbouring province of Malaita.

In preceding years in Solomon Islands the entire system of law and order and national security had been overthrown by Police and paramilitaries from these two biggest provinces. No loyalty to the state resulted in the Malaita militants (who have the upper hand in the Police Executive) ransacked the country’s armoury. On 5th June 2000, the day of the armoury takeover by the joint operations, comprising of Malaitan militants and Police/Paramilitary officers. A self-style coup was later staged and led by members of the Joint Operations Unit.

In the events that unfolded, the country’s democratically elected PM and economist by profession the late Bart Ulufa’alu was forced to resign under duress. In June 2000 he was kidnapped by militia members of the Joint Operations Unit who felt that although he was a Malaitan, he was not doing enough to protect their interests. Ulufa’alu subsequently resigned in exchange for his release. Manasseh Sogavare, who had earlier been Finance Minister in Ulufa’alu's government but had subsequently joined the opposition, was elected as Prime Minister by 23-21 over Rev. Leslie Boseto. However Sogavare's election was immediately shrouded in controversy because six MPs (thought to be supporters of Boseto) were unable to attend parliament for the crucial vote.

The late Ulufa’alu who was striving to calm the situation much earlier had called for Australia to intervene but there was no positive response. Australia under the leadership of John Howard responded by saying that it was an internal affair therefore Australia should not interfere with internal matters of a sovereign state.

In ensuing years, the situation got worst with heavy fighting and casualties by the two militant groups, crippling the government. The most affected sectors are Health, Education and the Economy.

Basic health services were severely affected. Most rural clinics and health centres closed as direct result of the tensions. The government has accumulated overseas medical supplies
therefore could not allow SIG to take supplies on pay-later arrangements. This was perhaps due to notion that Solomon Islands was itinerant towards the “failed state” destination. Many doctors and health workers have to flee to their respective homes for their personal safety, whilst some remained to withstand the trauma and pain that unfolds.

Whilst the country’s public servants, including doctors, nurses, police and teachers were faced with non-payment of their salaries, the country’s finance and Treasury Ministry was ruled by militia men and thugs. They stole from government coffers with all kinds of false and unsubstantiated claims day in, day out. Whilst this continued, health services at the National Referral Hospital and rural clinics continue to suffer and deteriorate.

Most schools on Guadalcanal remained closed since 1998 when the Tensions began, whilst Honiara schools no longer functioned properly. Schools would either go on until recess time at 10am or Teachers just send students home whenever militia mean or thugs fired some shots in the air to threaten or intimidate someone.

Other schools in the Western province were also affected due to the growing tensions in Gizo and other nearby islands and neighbouring Choiseul province, whilst all other provinces all have their share of the tension related effects, affecting their schools. Teachers were no longer paid their fortnightly salaries for up to 4 months or even more, making teaching no longer an obligation but circumstantial. Some teachers even fled to their own villages in their respective provinces for their personal safety.

The Solomon Islands economy was greatly affected, closing some of the leading industries. In the Western Province, the country’s top earner in the fisheries sector, Solomon Taiyo Company that operated a fleet of fishing vessels, exported skipjack tuna worldwide, and ran the country’s only tuna cannery was forced to shut down because Malaitans employees were targeted by some Western Province, Choiseul and Bougainvillian militant groups. It was a war against Malaitans in both Guadalcanal and Western Provinces.

Prior to that on Guadalcanal Island, Goldridge, the country’s only goldmine, was forced to close due to heavy fighting between Police and Guadalcanal Militants. Employees residing at the mine campsite (mostly expatriates) have to be airlifted by helicopter down to Honiara and evacuated home. The mine was eventually taken over by Guadalcanal militants led by former Warlord Harold Keke, now serving at least 3 consecutive life-sentences all tension related murder charges. The mine had been one of the country’s leading income earners, boosting the economy.

Just beneath the goldmine stood the country’s oil palm plantations, known as the Solomon Islands Plantation Limited (SIPL), a joint venture Company between CDC and Solomon Islands Government. At the time of closure, the Oil palm industry that exported crude oil was contributing significantly to the country’s economy.

It was at the Oil palm plantation in the Northern part of the plantation that Guadalcanal militants started their attack on innocent Malaitan oil palm employees and settlers. They were caught by surprise. It was estimated that around 20,000 Malaitans who settled in rural parts of Guadalcanal were forced to leave their homes, abandoning their properties and at least 3 lost their lives during the wave of attacks.
Many believed that because of their hard work and persistence, Malaitans became successful farmers, employees and businessmen. They owned agricultural farms, employed in all kinds of unskilled and skilled employment. They also owned trade stores, transport services and some dominated the copra and cocoa industries all over Guadalcanal.

Despite this many Guadalcanal landowners claimed that many of the Malaita settlers settled illegally, whilst at the same time claiming that there are others that bought land legally but had gone beyond the terms of their agreements by allowing many more of their relatives to come and settle with them without the land owner’s consent. Besides this, Guadalcanal leaders resented to the non-action by the national government to address the ‘Bona-Fide Demands of the People of Guadalcanal’, a protest document which was first submitted to the national government in 1988 while Guadalcanal man Ezekiel Alebua was the PM of Solomon Islands and which that include a number of claims, including the compensation claim for the murder of innocent Guadalcanal people murdered by Malaitans. Alebua’s government disregarded the Bona-Fide Demands.

These issues irked many young Guadalcanal natives to retaliate with arms. Driven by what I term as the will to “pay back” and “get back” the Guadalcanal people advanced their cause. Their mission was to kill any Malaitan who tried to stop them and to provoke tensions. To me this is a clear notion of pay-back on Malaitans. And on the issue of settlement, they saw this as a direct threat to land security on Guadalcanal and the only way is force them to leave and get their land back.

With the help of some of their leaders, young Solomon Islanders sought for the first time to ignite armed conflict, using licensed guns seized from legal owners, dug up World War 2 old ammunitions and home-made guns, eventually forcing Malaitans out from their settlements. In the cause of their attacks the following human right violations were committed; (1) forced displacement (2) brutal murders (3) sexually offences on women, (4) arson (5) destruction of properties and (6) disappearance.

A former Guadalcanal Militant once admitted that the move was to simply provoke Malaitans who are best known for their aggressiveness and retaliatory manners. What they have asked for worked well. Malaitan retaliated and the Malaita Eagle Force was formed to purposely retaliate against the atrocities and human right violations carried out by Guadalcanal Militants.

Meanwhile in Honiara, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) took control of the entire city. In the name of providing security to Honiara residents, MEF seized any vehicle they desired. They even ransacked Chinese Shops for rations and launched a mission to question, intimidate and kill anyone from Guadalcanal. Later when the Joint Operations was formed, they extended their vehicle seizures to other Solomon Islanders, expatriates and companies to increase logistics due to reports that Guadalcanal Militants would launch an undisclosed attack at all corners of Honiara to totally wipe out Malaitans. That did not happen but it was an inevitable rule of MEF/Joint operations that evidently disrupted, crippled and eventually closed many businesses in Honiara.

Today, these events remained part of Solomon Islands history and the arrival of RAMSI yet creates another new chapter in history’s manuscript.