

**CONFERENCE REPORT - SECURING A PEACEFUL PACIFIC  
15-17 October 2004**

**Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand**

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**BACKGROUND**

From 15th to 17th October 2004, a conference was held at the University of Canterbury's Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies with the title 'Securing a Peaceful Pacific – A Conference on Preventing and Resolving Conflict in the Pacific'. Promoted widely throughout the Pacific in that year it brought together academics, government officials, donor agencies and researchers all having connection and interest in the theme of 'Pacific regional security and conflict', that of course being a current "hot topic". I attended with funding assistance from the School of Law, USP, and also because the topic fired my enthusiasm and am planning to publish a paper on this topic in the near future.

The host and sponsors were: University of Canterbury (New Zealand) School of Political Science and Communication, Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, Pacific Cooperation Foundation (PCF), New Zealand International Aid and Development Agency (NZAID) and the New Zealand and Peace and Disarmament Education Trust (PADET). Given the list of sponsors, it was not difficult to understand why a conference on the Pacific was being hosted in New Zealand. This was also New Zealand's turn on the "stage" of Pacific security and conflict, which is fast becoming an industry for donor agencies.

**PURPOSE & OBJECTIVE**

The organisers had structured the conference to be one that would bring together practitioners, academics, government officials, aid workers, NGO's and diplomats that have had first hand practical experience with conflict in the Pacific. Participants were not restricted to Pacific peoples, but also to other academics, government officials, NGO's and aid workers from countries outside the Pacific who had experience of dealing with conflicts in the Pacific region. In total, approximately 230 participants attended.

An overall objective of the conference was to survey the existing landscape of conflicts (whether ethnic, political, or social) within countries in the Pacific, interpret the root causes of those conflicts based on actual experiences and studies and explore various means and practises of conflict resolution. There was also a need to view conflicts from various perspectives, including academic theories on conflict, empirical studies of conflict cases, state and government reactions to conflict hot-spots, personal experiences of conflict situations and military approaches to conflict – an objective effectively achieved given the repertoire of speakers and presenters in the programme. Each plenary session was followed by three seminar streams which meant that participants could choose which seminar to attend given the allocated topic and its nature. The choices were tough in some cases and so one had to make sacrifices between two stimulating seminars and only attend one.

The underlying goal of the Conference was to 'make a significant and lasting contribution to avoiding and

resolving regional conflict'. This would be the New Zealand government's push towards future plans for the establishment of a Regional Conflict Resolution Facility for the Pacific region.

## CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

### Day 1 – Opening Remarks & Formalities

The 3-day Conference opened on Friday 15th October with a traditional Maori ceremony called a powhiri, hosted by prominent Maori tribal leader, Sir Tipene O'Regan of Ngai Tahu. His powerful speech was in te reo Maori which was a pleasant experience as three-quarters of the participants had no clue what he was saying and yet everyone seemed to concur with the entire tone of his speech. It was also the first time for me to meet Sir Tipene in person even though I have read and followed some of his literary works.

The “formalness” of the Conference was marked right from the beginning with the status and character of the two keynote speakers. Greg Urwin, Secretary-General of the Pacific Islands Forum gave the opening key note speech followed by Hon. Marian Hobbs, New Zealand's Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control and Associate Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. This exemplified that this was a conference for the Pacific as a region but also with the interest of New Zealand in mind, as that “neighbour with a watchful eye”.

Greg Urwin maintained his brief as Secretary-General and even though he was fresh on the job as Secretary-General, it was evident from the audience that he carried a vast knowledge and understanding of the Pacific. He maintained the position of the Forum, its policy towards conflicts in the region as illustrated by the various declarations and communiqués issued by Forum leaders in the past and urged participants to consider those documents. He remarked on a very interesting fact when he mentioned that the very first military intervention in a conflict situation in the Pacific was in New Hebrides in 1980 during the Santo Rebellion.

Marian Hobbs instantly illustrated New Zealand's passion and interest on the issue of conflict and security in the Pacific. Her speech was longer and more anecdotal with added focus on what New Zealand was doing in Niue to reconstruct the island after Cyclone Eta, leaving the audience to make the connection between natural disasters and armed conflicts. Her opening statement was that ‘security is a state of mind’ and that her views were that the root causes of conflict were economic and social factors such as unemployment, poverty, lack of education and so on. Her enthusiasm grew as she recounted to the audience what the New Zealand government and its aid agencies were doing in the Pacific to address these issues. In summary, it was clear to see that not only has Marian Hobbs never lived in the Pacific, she had only been in the job for a short period and had a lot to learn about the dynamics of “peace” and “Pacific”, though her enthusiasm did make up for this.

### Day 2 – Conflict Prevention and Resolution: Lessons and Experiences Preventing conflict:

Without the introductory protocols of conferences, Day 2 tore right into the subject and considered the causes of conflicts in the Pacific, and focused on issues of ethnic differences, economic and social disparities, and the role of the military and police, with a deliberate focus on Melanesia. That set the stage for the second part of Day 2 which concerned conflict prevention methods and practises of conflict resolution.

The morning plenary session of Day 2 was delivered by Professor Peter Wallensteen of Uppsala University, Sweden, on ‘Preventing Conflict in the Pacific’. His role in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program and his exposure to the Bougainville war, ensured that his presentation was stimulating, practical and relevant. He was open about what caused conflicts and gave interesting insight into the dynamics of conflicts with examples from other parts of the world. The seminar streams that followed this plenary

were all appealing, but a choice had to be made so I attended the seminar streams on ‘Traditional Means of Conflict Prevention’ especially to hear Dr. Maunka Henare and ‘Preventing Conflict: Ethnic Tensions and Social Inequalities’ especially to hear Dr. Tupeni Baba and Dr. Ron May. I was glad to have selected those seminars as they both emphasised and determined some of the questions that lurked in my mind on these issues. Speakers fervently displayed their views, objectively argued their positions and connected themselves with practical experiences of conflict situations.

The afternoon plenary session was to be a “word from the sponsors” session. New Zealand and Australian experiences and lessons were documented and illustrated by a variety of speakers. The plenary session was delivered by John Hayes on ‘New Zealand’s Role in Pacific Conflict Resolution: Reflections on Experience’. John Hayes was a former New Zealand diplomat and spoke on his personal experiences in dealing with the Bougainville crisis as a diplomat in Papua New Guinea. The second plenary session was on ‘RAMSI and the Solomon Islands Experience’ and military and police officials who had served on RAMSI delivered this session. I attended the seminar stream on ‘Lessons from the Solomon Islands’ which was quite provoking as the audience raised many criticisms on the advent of “intervention forces” and the actual experience in Solomon Islands. The seminar ended with many unanswered questions, strong feelings over intervention and better insight into the nature of RAMSI and the Solomon Islands ethnic conflict.

### **Day 3 - Post Conflict Reconciliation and Reconstruction: Approaches & Ideas**

Most of us were left on a high note after Day 2 and needed more time to dissect and analyse the issues further. Time being the dictator, Day 3 had to proceed and now the more calming theme of post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction. Looking at traditional and alternative approaches to resolving conflicts, rebuilding communities and people after a conflict and the minimisation of future conflicts. The theme of one seminar I attended and spoke briefly in ‘Reconciliation and Justice’ featured a presentation from Ted Hill on the practice of traditional methods of reconciliation in an urban setting in Vanuatu.

The role of NGOs and civil society was the theme carried by several seminars on that day, to emphasise the contribution that non-state actors have made to conflict situations either as facilitators or absorbing the side-effects and bi-products of conflicts. The role of women in peace-building and resolution was featured also and great interest was given to the plight of Bougainville women as documented in a recent publication *As Mothers of the land – The birth of the Bougainville Women for Peace Foundation* co-authored by Josephine Takunani Sirivi wife of Sam Kauona. This book was featured at the conference.

The final plenary session awaited by all, ‘Regionalism and the Reduction of Conflict in the Pacific Islands’, presented by Emeritus Professor Ron Crocombe, was a fitting climax to a conference which produced a kaleidoscope of questions and opinions. Ron was able to capture the philosophical argument that “regionalism” was the key to resolving conflicts in the Pacific.

### **CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS**

Given the array of presenters and topics, I walked away from the conference with shades of satisfaction that I had actually been able to experience contact with certain experts and hear their views. I became persuaded that I should become part of this debate, given that I was now categorised within this “arc of instability”. However, two presentations caught my attention and therefore warrant mention in this report.

The panel discussion session on ‘Lessons from the Solomon Islands’ provoked strong views for the entire audience including myself. Panel speakers included Judith Bennett, Dr. Kabini Sanga, Paul Roughan and Dr. Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka. Three of the panel members were Solomon Islanders, speaking intimately of the conflict and ethnic tensions in their country. Judith Bennett, Associate Professor of History at Otago University, set the scene by pulling from her vast knowledge of Solomon Islands post-contact history, to

provide a historical timeline of the Solomon Islands, culminating in the 2000 coup. The deterioration of the provincial government system, exploitation of natural resources, poor management of public funds, rising social inequalities and unresolved land claims were subtly referred to by Bennett as the “perfect” environment for a conflict on a national scale. Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, apart from being a close wantok of mine, gave a moving talk on what he labelled as a situation of “Crowded States” in the Solomon Islands post-conflict period. Tarcisius participated in the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement on behalf of the Isatabu Freedom Fighters and supported the peaceful resolution of the ethnic conflict, but his post-conflict analysis uncovered tough criticisms of RAMSI. Sudden influx of Australian and foreign advisors in the public service, lack of opportunity for transfer of skills, piecemeal approach to technical assistance by donor agencies and non-involvement of key stakeholders in nation-building were all identified as problems which may cause RAMSI to not achieve its objectives in the Solomon Islands. I welcomed Tarcisius’s presentation as he was able to draw practical faults on the “intervention” method of conflict resolution. His presentation had a pleasant balancing effect and allowed the “newcomers” to experience the other-side of the RAMSI story, which from the opening day, was being hailed as a success by Australia and New Zealand.

Ron Crocombe had been poised by the organisers of the Conference as the feature presenter of the Conference, his speaking title ‘Regionalism and Reduction of Conflict in the Pacific Islands’ was to epitomise the objective of the Conference: regionalism as the key in resolving future conflicts in the Pacific region. Ron emphasised the socio-political complexities and contrasts that existed in the Pacific which disturbed may disturb any idealistic view of the Pacific as being “one region”. He also pointed out the external forces that influence the way things have developed in the Pacific and how these forces continue to plague the Pacific region today. As always, there was an academic honesty about Ron’s thesis, but the honesty did not come from the fact that he was being academically correct, it emanated from the fact that he is “tangata Pasifika” and has maintained this status throughout his many works. Crocombe gave no formal endorsement to the proposal of a Regional Conflict Resolution Facility, but hinted that Honiara be the potential location and that any such facility operate with minimal bureaucracy, avoid over-funding by donor agencies and be practical in its outlook. His admission that “Pacific regionalism” is another form of “neo-colonial construct” sits comfortably in my mind. His analogy of a Regional Conflict Resolution Facility today with the British Colonial Office headed by the Western Pacific High Commission in Fiji and the Naval Seat in Sydney during the colonial era was a fitting conclusion to his presentation.

## SUMMARY

Conflict Prevention, Post-Conflict Reconciliation and Pacific Regionalism are real issues for the Pacific peoples. Conferences like these promote dialogue and understanding between interested groups, governments and related organisations as well as academic interaction. However, I am anxious that the enthusiasm to “secure a peaceful Pacific” by donor agencies and their governments may become replaced with their pursuit of political and security interests and foreign policy agendas.