

**Solomon Islands General Elections
5 December 2001**

**REPORT OF THE
PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM
OBSERVER GROUP**

**Mendana Hotel, Honiara
Solomon Islands**

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INTRODUCTION

Invitation

On 8 November 2001, the Caretaker Government of the Solomon Islands wrote to the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat officially requesting the Pacific Islands Forum to send observers to the 2001 national elections in the Solomon Islands.

2. In response to the invitation, the Secretary General appointed a Forum Observer Group comprising of eminent persons from three member countries of the Forum as an extension of the “Secretary General’s good offices role” in the monitoring of political developments and assistance with peace building programmes in member countries.

Terms of Reference

3. The Forum Observer Group, comprising of eminent persons from the Federated States of Micronesia, Papua New Guinea and Samoa, was to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the Solomon Islands’ elections in accordance with the Solomon Islands’ laws. The Terms of Reference for the Forum Observer Group is at Annex 1. It highlights the need for the Forum Observer Group to act impartially and independently. The Forum Observer Group had no executive role; its function was not to execute, supervise, or advise but specifically confined to observing the process of the elections. The Group was to submit a report directly to the Secretary General of the Forum, after the completion of the elections.

4. Support for the team including briefing and provision of background notes, was provided by a team of three senior staff from the Forum Secretariat assisted by a senior official from the Commonwealth Secretariat who was on attachment to the Forum Secretariat for the duration of deployment of the Group.

The Work of the Group

5. An advance party, comprising of a senior staff member from the Secretariat, was in Honiara from 20 November and began coordinating a programme for the Group, a week before the arrival of the Group.

6. The Group assembled for the first time in Brisbane, Australia on 26 November, where the first briefing for the group took place. (The FSM eminent person was unfortunately unable to make it to this meeting because of travel complications but joined the group in Honiara on 4 December, 2001) The Group also had its first meeting with the Commonwealth Observer Group in Brisbane at which the respective Chairpersons of the two Groups agreed to collaborate and work as closely as possible on the ground in Honiara.

7. On 27 November, the Group traveled together to Honiara and on arrival issued an arrival statement, a copy of which is attached at Annex 2. The Group began its formal programme in Solomon Islands on 28 November starting with courtesy calls on the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, the Chairman of the Electoral Commission, and the Director of the Forum Fisheries Agency. From 28-29 November, the Group was briefed, jointly with the Commonwealth Observer Group, by representatives of major political parties, NGO's (including media organizations and women's groups) and the Coordinator of International Observers to the Elections. The Group was also briefed by Heads of Forum member missions based in Honiara on 30 November.

8. On the same day, the Group visited Tulagi (the old capital) in the Central Province, (a province which the Group did not cover during the actual elections) and met with the Returning Officer for the constituency as well as observed a training session for Presiding Officers for the Province.

9. On 2nd and 3rd December, the Group began deployment with two members deployed separately to two constituencies in Malaita, one member to Guadalcanal, the Chair and two other members deployed to three different constituencies in Honiara and one member to the Western Province. The original intention of the Group was to deploy in three teams with each observer accompanied by one senior support staff. This proved impossible because of logistical difficulties and arrangements for deployment, by necessity, had to conform to the deployment arrangements and placements organized and determined by the Coordinator of International Observers to the elections. We therefore decided to deploy members to Malaita, Honiara, and Guadalcanal, the major centers for the recent unrests, and one other province to broaden the focus of the Group's work. These preferences were conveyed to the Coordinator of International Observers who largely accommodated the Group's preferences. It is however recommended that future deployments of similar Forum Observer Groups work as independently as possible.

10. In the lead up to the elections and during deployment, members of the Group in their areas of responsibility met with Provisional Electoral Managers, Returning Officers, Presiding Officers, Polling Assistants, candidates, voters, District Police Officers, attended campaign rallies and visited polling stations. We generally made ourselves visible, spoke with electors and explained our mission. We were very pleased to note that our visit was well publicised with cover page coverage for the first two days after arrival in Solomon Islands. Our presence was therefore widely known and appreciated by those that we spoke to.

Chapter One: Political Background

General

11. Solomon Islands land area is distributed over some 600,000 sq. km. of sea, lying as a scattered archipelago oriented northwest to southeast, and extending over 1,400km from one extremity to the other. The six major islands are Choiseul, New Georgia, Santa

Isabel, Guadalcanal, Malaita and San Cristobal. The largest island Guadalcanal, has an area of approximately 5,660 sq km. In 1998, the country recorded a total population of 417,800.

12. More than 80% of the population subsists on fishing and traditional farming, living outside of the cash economy. The main source of export revenues are primary products such as timber, copra and cocoa. Currently, forestry is the largest single industry in Solomon Islands mostly undertaken by foreign-owned companies.

13. In addition, the Solomon Islands EEZ is rich in fish and has one of the largest tuna fishing grounds in the world, attracting some of the major fishing fleets, especially those of Japan and Taiwan to which fishing licenses are sold. Solomon Islands is largely dependent on overseas donors for its economic development.

14. Growing population and migration to urban areas continue to place pressure on infrastructure and increase the demand for water, sanitation, housing, education and health services. The literacy rate in Solomon Islands is low and access to primary and secondary education is limited compared to other Pacific Island countries.

15. Land is a complex and integral part of Solomon Islands way of life. The registration of land titles was introduced in 1963 under the Land and Titles Ordinance of 1959. Land can be classified into two categories according to the system of tenure governing ownership of rights and interest in land. Customary land is owned and used according to unwritten traditional rules that vary across the country. All such land is usually owned by a lineage group and children inherit land rights either through the father or the mother, depending on the lineal system practiced by the clan. Registered land, also known as alienated land, has its owners and boundaries recorded in the land registry in Honiara. Titles to over 97% of alienated land are registered and rights and boundaries are guaranteed by law rather than by custom.

16. The Solomon Islands, in particular the island of Guadalcanal, was the scene of some of the most violent battles of World War II after Solomon Islands was invaded by the Japanese in 1941. After the war, the capital, which was previously on the island of Tulagi, was transferred to Honiara on the north coast of Guadalcanal.

17. The official language is English, although the most commonly used language is Pidgin. In addition, about 87 different local dialects are used, with people living in villages only a few miles apart frequently unable to understand each other. There is no vernacular common to the whole country.

18. Over 90% of the population are Christians. Approximately one third belong to the Anglican Church while 19.2% belong to the Roman Catholic Church, 17.6% to the South Seas Evangelical Church, 11 % to the United Church and 10% to the Seventh Day Adventists. Eight percent belong to smaller religious groups.

Political Developments since Independence

19. Solomon Islands, was originally a German Protectorate and was ceded to the British in 1893. The islands were occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War. After the war, the United States occupied the islands briefly and then returned the islands to British control following the war. Solomon Islands gained its independence from Great Britain in 1978.

20. In the ten years following independence, Solomon Islands had three Prime Ministers: the last Chief Minister under the British sovereignty, Sir Peter Kenilorea, became the first Prime Minister of the newly independent country. Sir Peter was succeeded by another former Chief Minister, the late Solomon Mamaloni in 1981. Sir Peter regained the prime ministership in 1984. In 1986 Sir Peter resigned and was replaced by Ezekiel Alebua, who held the post until 1989, when Mamaloni became Prime Minister again.

21. Prior to the 1993 general elections, a number of opposition parties combined to form the National Coalition Partners (NCP), with the aim of changing the leadership in Solomon Islands. The NCP nominated Francis Billy Hilly, an independent, for the post of Prime Minister and he was elected Prime Minister on June 18, 1993. Billy Hilly, whose position was never entirely secure, lost in the leadership struggle in October 1994 as a result of his attempt to reduce the highly lucrative but unsustainable rates of logging through a moratorium on log exports. This caused some of the members of his coalition to shift their allegiance yet again to Mamaloni, then the leader of the Solomon Islands National Unity, Reconciliation and Progressive Party (formerly the Group of National Unity and Reconciliation, GNUR), who subsequently became the Prime Minister again in early November 1994.

22. The desire of the population for a change led to a heavy turnover of incumbents in the general elections held on August 6, 1997. It prompted former opposition members, party representatives and independents alike, to form a coalition called the Alliance for Change, and, after intense post-election negotiations, their candidate, Bartholomew Ulufa'alu, leader of the Liberal Party, became Prime Minister. Ulufa'alu made economic and financial management a priority, devoting much time and effort to a policy of structural reform

23. The biggest issue facing the Ulufa'alu government was the size of the public debt, and the unsustainable rate at which the country's major resource, timber, was being harvested. The government of Ulufa'alu, elected in August 1997, pledged to introduce structural reforms to tackle these problems.

24. The late 1990s saw heightened ethnic tensions in the Solomon Islands, which culminated in the forced resignation of Ulufa'alu on 14 June 2000. The Solomon Islands Parliament on 30 June 2000 elected Manasseh Sogavare, who was then the Leader of the Opposition, as the country's new Prime Minister.

Political System

25. The Solomon Islands Government is a constitutional monarchy with the Queen as Head of State. The monarch is represented in Solomon Islands by a Governor-General nominated by parliament and appointed by the Queen for a term of five years. Under the country's constitution, the Governor-General can only serve a maximum of two terms. The Prime Minister is the Head of Government

26. The national parliament consists of 50 members, including the Prime Minister and 20 members of Cabinet. The Prime Minister is elected by and from the members of parliament and cabinet ministers are appointed by the Governor-General on the Prime Minister's recommendation. The Speaker is not an elected member of Parliament but is appointed by popular vote of members of Parliament. There are a number of political parties and several independent members in parliament.

27. There are however, no real formal parties in the conventional sense, in the Solomon Islands. "Party allegiances" tend to be fluid, and are based more on dominant individuals and political dealings rather than on any firmly held, long-standing, political or ideological positions. "Crossing of the floor" is not uncommon leading to unstable coalitions, which has been characteristic of Solomon Islands young political history. "Parties" include the National Action Party, the Labour and the National Party, all of which, together with three minor parties, were members of the ruling Alliance for Change coalition from 1997 until June 2000. The Solomon Islands National Unity, Reconciliation and Progressive Party was the ruling party prior to the elections.

28. The normal life of a parliament is four years, although in recent years, parliaments have been changed more frequently with members realigning themselves. Both Pidgin and English are used in the parliament.

29. Voting for the national parliament is by universal adult suffrage on the English model of "first past the post". Every Solomon Islander over the age of 18 is entitled to vote and persons over the age of 21 are eligible to stand for election.

30. Solomon Islands is divided into 50 constituencies and ten administrative areas of which nine are Provinces administered locally by elected Provincial Councils and the tenth, Honiara is administered by the Honiara Municipal Authority. Until 1990, it had been administered by the Honiara Town Council but a series of no confidence votes caused it to be dissolved and replaced with the current authority which comprises members of both the public and private sector. The provincial assemblies have local responsibilities in the fields of health, education and communications.

Ethnic Tensions

31. Towards the end of 1997, a group which called themselves “The Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army” (GRA) emerged in Honiara and began to challenge the authority of the State, and the National Government.

32. At about the same time, the Guadalcanal Provincial Government was issuing various demands on the Government. These included: enacting of tougher laws by the National Government to stop people from other islands coming to Guadalcanal, stopping the sale of customary land on Guadalcanal to outsiders, the National Government to seriously consider compensating the Province for the death of 25 of its people, and the National Government to consider moving the Capital, Honiara, away from the Province.

33. These demands were pursued by the GRA, which had acquired large quantities of guns from undisclosed sources and also raided Police outposts seizing guns and ammunition. The group caused disturbances and harassed people and their properties, in particular targeting the Malaitans. The GRA was made up mostly of unemployed young militants from around Guadalcanal Province.

34. Police and the para-military force advised people from Malaita residing in Guadalcanal and in the capital city Honiara to take shelter in their home provinces until the situation returned to normal. Around 20,000 Malaitans from rural Guadalcanal were displaced from their homes and moved back to Malaita Province. In response, a Malaitan militant group, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), became active, made up mainly of those displaced Malaitans who had lost their properties as a result of the ethnic tension. This group organised themselves and raided the armoury in Auki, Malaita, in early 2000 and began attacking the GRA.

35. In early 2000, law and order deteriorated, particularly on Guadalcanal. Major export industries closed down, Government revenues plummeted and Government services were severely curtailed. Despite several attempts at mediation, the conflict intensified in 2000 with violent confrontations between the two rival militia, the MEF and Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), formerly the GRA.

2000 Overthrow of Government

36. In June 2000, long standing hostilities between the MEF and IFM culminated in the takeover of the capital Honiara by the Malaita Eagle Force on June 5 2000, with the Prime Minister, Bartholomew Ulufa’alu put under house arrest by the MEF and forced to resign.

37. The Solomon Islands Parliament on 30 June 2000 elected Manasseh Sogavare, who was then the Leader of the Opposition, as the country’s new Prime Minister succeeding Ulufa’alu, following the latter’s resignation on 14 June 2000. Sogavare later

announced a nineteen-member cabinet consisting of the former opposition and independent members of Parliament.

38. One of the immediate tasks the Sogavare led government undertook when it assumed control in early July 2000, was to address the ethnic crisis which had plagued the country for the past two years. The conflict which involved the armed elements of the MEF and the IFM had cost many lives as well as destruction to properties belonging to the national Government, organisations, private companies and individuals. Some of the major companies operating in the country, such as the Solomon Islands Plantation Limited, Solomon Taiyo Limited, and Gold Ridge Mining Company had closed down. The country's public service was severely affected and many public servants took unpaid leave and returned to their home provinces due to the worsening law and order situation and the Government's financial situation. The country's regular police force became ineffective and non-operational as the law and order situation was under the command and responsibility of the MEF.

39. The new government, on assuming power, immediately created a new ministry called the Ministry for National Unity, Peace and Reconciliation to deal specifically with the ethnic conflict. This Ministry was headed by the Deputy Prime Minister in the pre-election Government. The Government also quickly attended to the demands of the militant groups in paying out compensation for their lost property and other claims.

Townsville Peace Agreement

40. The biggest breakthrough in the two-year old conflict came on 15 October 2000 when the Solomon Islands Government, together with the MEF and the IFM, signed a peace agreement in Townsville, Australia. The agreement which became known as the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA) provided for the restoration of the law and order situation and the return of arms and weapons removed from the police at the height of the conflict. In return, the national Government was to provide amnesty for the militants involved in the conflict, as well as address the demands of the two groups. The TPA was well received by all Solomon Islanders as well as the international community.

41. An International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT), comprising of nationals of Australia, New Zealand and other Pacific Island countries is currently in Guadalcanal and Malaita to oversee the surrendering of arms and other weapons illegally taken by the militants at the height of the crisis as provided for under the TPA.

TPA Review

42. One of the major activities the Government embarked on recently was the review of the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA). The TPA had been instrumental in ending hostilities between the warring parties and provided an opportunity for the Government and the Donor community to address some of the issues arising out of the conflict. The main purpose of the review was to give a better perspective to the Government and the parties on what had already been achieved and what is yet to be achieved. The TPA

contained many commitments and undertakings by the Government, many of which have not been achieved.

43. However, the review was postponed indefinitely following the killing of one of the commanders of the IFM reportedly by members of the special constables believed to be aligned with the MEF. No dates have yet been confirmed for the resumption of the TPA review talks.

The Uneasy Peace

44. The peace process had not progressed as smoothly as intended. It remained fragile with increased incidences of violence in early 2001. In May, a man believed to be from Guadalcanal was beheaded and displayed in the Honiara market place bearing anti-Guadalcanal messages. Retribution followed with the killing of a Malaita man. In July there were reports of rebels attacking the hospital and in June, the provincial governor of Guadalcanal was shot in the head, body and arm. This seemed to indicate the inability of the police force to control and indeed prevent such acts of lawlessness. The confidence of the general population in the police was at an all time low.

45. Five hundred guns are reportedly still to be surrendered and assumed to be with both militant forces. Cars seized during the height of the tension are still being driven around Honiara and Malaita by former militants with the police either unable or reluctant to do anything. Corruption allegations have again run rampant.

46. In the week before the elections, the police reportedly threatened to go on strike due to the non-payment of allowances. The majority of the public service, we were told, had not been paid for several weeks.

47. There was a general air of disillusionment by the populace with regard to the police and governance and an overall recognition of the importance of the 2001 elections for the future of the country.

Situation on arrival

48. By the time of our arrival, ethnic tensions had subsided but generally tension still remained due largely to conflicts within the two main militia groups and the presence of up to 500 high-powered firearms in the country. Our Observer Group was unable to travel freely and independently throughout country. In many places outside greater Honiara, Observer Groups required an IPMT escort as no one could drive more than fifteen minutes east or west of Honiara without such an escort. In addition, our drivers in the capital were fearful of their safety and reluctant to go outside greater Honiara.

49. Soon after our arrival, a major company, Goodman-Fielder, evacuated most of its expatriate staff, and scaled down operations because of threats to its management following a demand for the payment of a large sum of money to disgruntled former employees.

Pacific Islands Forum and Solomon Islands

50. Leaders, at their 2000 meeting in Kiribati warmly welcomed the Solomon Islands' peace agreement reached in Townsville on 15 October. They urged all parties to the conflict to be resolute in their efforts to bring about a comprehensive and lasting peace. Leaders urged the international community, and particularly countries of the region to give the peace process every encouragement, including by contributing generously to Solomon Islands' urgent security, rehabilitation and development needs.

51. At their 2001 Meeting in Nauru, Forum Leaders expressed their support for the efforts of the Solomon Islands' Government and people, and the work of the International Peace Monitoring Team in the Solomon Islands and welcomed the decision to hold elections later in 2001.

The 2001 General Elections

52. On 23 October 2001, the country's Governor General, Sir Father John Lapli, issued the writ for elections, paving the way for the elections to be held on 5 December 2001. The Government aborted its earlier plan to postpone elections for another twelve months, due to mounting pressure and opposition from the public, the media as well as the international community. The decision to hold elections sooner rather than later was welcomed by the majority of Solomon Islanders as providing them with hope and an opportunity to rebuild their country after two years of civil war and ethnic tension.

Chapter Two: The Electoral Framework and Preparations for the Elections

Legal Framework

53. There are three key documents which provide the legal framework for the elections and they are:

- a) The Constitution;
- b) The National Parliament Electoral Provisions Act, 1980 (Cap.87); and
- c) Local Government (Registration of Voters) Regulation

54. The Constitution of the Solomon Islands became law on 7 July 1978 when the country attained political independence. It provides for a Westminster type of Government with the Queen as Head of State represented in Solomon Islands by the Governor General, a Prime Minister as Head of Government, a one chamber Parliament where the law of majority operates and an independent judicial system.

55. The National Parliament Electoral Provisions Act of 1980 makes provisions for the Parliamentary constituencies for Parliament, for the registration of electors, for the

conduct of the elections, for election offences, for the hearing of petitions in relation to the elections and other matters relating to the elections.

56. The Local Government (Registration of Voters) Regulation provides for the registration of voters for the provincial government elections. Provincial rolls were used as the starting point for the national electoral rolls when Solomon Islands became independent.

The Electoral Commission

57. The Election Commission established under Section 57 of the Constitution, is charged with directing and overseeing the conduct of the elections as well as the observance of legal provisions. It is an independent supervisory body with no legislative authority. It has no role in the receipt or determination of election petitions.

58. The Commission is Chaired by the Speaker of Parliament, Hon Paul Tovua who oversees two other members recommended by the Judicial and Legal Services Commission, and appointed by the Governor General. The Electoral Commission appoints a Returning Officer for each constituency; an Electoral Manager for each province, to ensure a fair election; a Registration Officer for the registration of electors in a voting area; and a Revising Officer to revise the list of electors.

59. The Chief Electoral Officer and his staff based in Honiara assist the Electoral Commission with the executive and logistic operations of preparing for the elections.

Constituencies

60. The Electoral Constituencies of the Solomon Islands are set out in the First Schedule of the National Parliament Electoral Provisions Act, as amended in 1996. It provides for 50 members of Parliament to be appointed from each of the 50 Constituencies under the “first past the post” voting system. A full listing of the Provinces, Constituencies and Registered voters for the 2001 elections, are as follows:

Name of Province	No. of Constituencies	Number of Registered Voters
Central	2	14,663
Choiseul	3	13,165
Guadalcanal	8	36,468
Honiara	3	39,736
Isabel	3	14,892
Makira/Ulawa	4	17,644
Malaita	14	88,833
Rennell/Bellona	1	2,986
Temotu	3	13,041
Western	9	42,085
Totals	50	283,513

Constituency Boundary Commission

61. The Constitution provides for a Constituency Boundaries Commission (CBC) consisting of a Chairman and two other members appointed by the Governor General, acting in accordance with the advice of the Judicial and Legal Service Commission, and ex-officio members holding the offices of Chief Surveyor and Head of the Government Statistical Services.

62. It further provides that the country may be divided into not less than thirty and not more than fifty constituencies. For these elections there were 50 constituencies. The boundary of each constituency is prescribed by Parliament on a recommendation from the Constituency Boundaries Commission. The Commission has the authority to review the number of boundaries of the constituencies at least every ten years and make recommendations to Parliament for alterations. It is important to note that in making recommendations the CBC shall have regard to “the principle that the number of inhabitants of each constituency shall be as nearly equal as is reasonably practical”.

63. During the course of the Group’s discussions with political parties, members of civil society and other interested groups, a view commonly expressed was that a review of the boundaries of the constituencies was desirable before the next general elections. We found that the present boundaries led to a disparity in representation and also that population growth in some constituencies had outstripped that of others. For example there are 18,690 registered voters in Honiara East constituency, 12,551 in Central Honiara and 9,477 in West Honiara.

The Electoral Time Table

64. Election activities had to be completed within a prescribed period of time. The key dates in the electoral timetable were as follows:

- 30 June – 28 August: Voter Registration, with a ten day period for objection from 28 August.
- 23 October : Governor General proclaimed a date for the elections
- 24-30 October : Publication of Notice of Elections by Returning Officers in each Constituency
- 24-30 October : Nomination Period started from date of publication of Election Notice
- 7 November: End of Nomination Period
- 9 November: Initial list of Validly nominated Candidates
- 10 November: Final withdrawal of Candidates

- 11-27 November: Final Notice of Polls, including Days/hours of election, Candidate Details and Symbols, Nominators Details, Polling Stations and Electors allotted to each polling station.
- 1 December: Appointment of Polling Agents
- 3 December: Appointment of Counting Agents
- 5 December: Election Day
- As soon as practicable after the elections: Counting of Votes
- Immediately following Counting/Verification: Announcement of winning candidates

Voter Registration

65. The Electoral Commission is responsible for the registration of voters. We were informed that for the elections on 5 December, the voters' register comprised to a large extent an updated version of the register of voters prepared for the 1997 Elections except for two constituencies where the rolls were burnt during the tension. These rolls were recreated using archival records of the 1997 rolls. To be on the 2001 Voter register, a person must be listed on the Register of Electors in 1997 and still be qualified, or had registered to vote during the registration exercise that took place between 30 June and 28 August 2001. There was a period of 10 days set-aside after 28 August for any objections to the Voter Register.

66. To be on the register as a voter, a person must:

- Be a citizen of the Solomon Islands
- Be 18 years old
- Be ordinarily a resident of the constituency and place for which he/she registered
- Not be under a sentence of death
- Not be under imprisonment for six months or more
- Not be certified insane or judged to be of unsound mind.

67. The total number of registered voters for the 2001 elections was 283, 513.

68. The Electoral Commissioner informed us that for the first time the electoral register had been computerised; that within their resources they had updated the register and tried to produce an accurate register; and that they had provided for a claims and objections period as required by law. We expressed concern to the Chairman of the Electoral Commission at the significant increase of approximately 80,000 more registered

than for the last election. We also expressed surprise that the number of eligible voters was so high as the total population of the country is estimated at approximately 400,000.

69. The Electoral Commissioner told us that the Commission estimated that the register was inflated by perhaps 10 per cent as some voters had registered twice – once in their own provinces and once in the capital. He also said that much of this was caused by the extensive population shifts during the political disturbances. In addition, because registration of births and deaths is not widely done in Solomon Islands, it was not always possible to delete from the register the names of people who had died especially in the more remote areas of the country.

Voter Education

70. As part of its overall responsibilities, the Electoral Commission conducted a series of voter awareness exercises which were non-political. It also invited active civic society groups in the country to inform electors about their rights and responsibilities, the importance of the elections and where and how to cast their votes. The voter awareness programme was designed to convey objective and impartial information to the electors.

71. The voter awareness programme continued right up to the elections and included programmes both on the radio and in the local newspaper, organization of a 2 day seminar at which civil society and political parties participated (and which was broadcasted live), and skits and plays aimed at encouraging and enhancing public awareness of the importance of registering for the elections and voting.

Political Parties

72. The political party system in the Solomon Islands tends to be fluid. Usually coalitions are formed after the elections prior to the election of the Prime Minister. In relation to this, there were strong views expressed to the Group for the desirability of having observers on the ground not only for the elections but also more crucially, at around the time the Prime Minister was to be elected.

73. Party allegiance tend to be based more on dominant individuals and specific issues rather than on any firmly held political or ideological positions. Parties include the People's Progressive Party (PPP), the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change (SIAC), the Solomon Islands Democratic Party, the People's Alliance Party, Solomon Islands Labour Party, the Solomon Islands New Party and the Independent Group.

74. The Group met with representatives of most political parties as well as representatives of NGOs including the media and women's groups. There was a common thread in the major issues highlighted by the political parties, NGOs, and all those that the Group spoke to.

Major Election Issues

75. There was shared concern over the breakdown of law and order, mostly around areas in Guadalcanal and Malaita. This was seen by most whom we met as a priority that needed to be addressed urgently. The Group was advised of the 500 guns that were still with ex-militia which were reportedly used in recent cases of violence. The Group was also advised that stolen vehicles were being driven around these areas with no indication of those involved taken to task. These events showed that the police force was unable or unwilling to act and consequently, the people of Solomon Islands had lost faith in the force.

76. The Group was advised that the ethnic tension over the past two years had taken its toll on the economy of the country, which continue to experience a sharp decline with no signs of improvement. Major economic activities had closed; the civil service had not been paid for several weeks; inter-island air services have been closed; health, education and other sectors have continued to suffer from the precarious financial situation. Other provinces have indicated frustration and dissatisfaction over the effect of the problems primarily centered on Guadalcanal and Malaita and were actively advocating more autonomy to provincial Governments.

77. The compensation issue and lack of overall transparency in governance had left most Solomon Islanders disillusioned. Issues raised to the Group included the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) and the Compensation payouts which were seen to create an uneven playing field in the elections. Huge sums of money in compensation had reportedly been paid out to those associated with the MEF, while ordinary citizens who had also lodged compensation claims have yet to be compensated. The funds provided for compensation by Taiwan had reportedly been exhausted, adding to the disillusionment of the people.

78. The practice of “voter buying” was reportedly the norm in Solomon Islands politics and one which election education campaigns have tried to address with the message - “ take the bribe but vote for a good candidate.”

79. Most parties have campaigned along the same themes; reviving the economy, electing good and honest leaders, good governance, transparency and accountability, addressing the law and order situation, reviving the public and private sector, and addressing the outstanding compensation issue.

80. All who spoke to the Group recognized the importance of the 2001 elections as a possible turning point for Solomon Islands.

Observers

81. There were in total 84 international observers to the Solomon Islands elections, from the Commonwealth, the European Union, the Pacific Islands Forum, the United

Nations, and from Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Japan, Kiribati, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Vanuatu.

82. The Observers were mostly welcomed by the political parties, NGOs and the public although there were strong sentiments expressed to the Group that observers should also stay for the election of the Prime Minister which most whom the Group spoke to, saw as the most crucial period in the election process.

Chapter Three: The Campaign and the News Media

The Campaign

83. Campaigning in the Solomon Islands was mostly very subdued. It was not until the day before elections that active campaigning became visible. In Honiara, on the eve of the election, lively and colourful motorcades festooned with the symbol of the candidates were seen for the first time since our arrival. There were vehicles carrying whole mango trees for the candidate whose symbol was the mango; vehicles festooned with coconut branches for the candidate whose symbol was a coconut, likewise umbrellas and so forth. However, because there were few established political parties in Solomon Islands the campaign that we saw consisted mainly of impromptu meetings by candidates in villages and public places. These were peaceful events and we were pleased to note that there was no mudslinging or personal attacks on candidates.

The News Media

84. Solomon Islands media industry is small and active. The main newspaper is the Solomon Islands Star, established in 1982, which is published five times a week (Mon-Fridays.) The rival Solomon Express is a weekly established last year and published on Fridays. Both newspapers are privately owned. A variety of civil society groups and NGO's operate newsletters and information sheets.

85. The main broadcast media is the state-run Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC) whose AM band is the only media with national coverage, although the signal strength fluctuates in parts of the archipelago. SIBC also operates an FM station, "Wantok FM," which is one of the three FM stations in the country whose main coverage area is greater Honiara. SIBC has extended its services to include an Internet site, www.sibconline.com.sb

86. The other two FM stations are privately owned. PAOA FM is a joint venture between the Solomon Islands Star newspaper and Communications Fiji Ltd., which also runs FM stations in Fiji and Papua New Guinea. PAOA FM has a repeater in Auki which extends its coverage to parts of Guadalcanal, Malaita, Isabel, and Central Provinces. The third FM station is Z-FM which operates mainly around greater Honiara.

87. Although television services began recently in Solomon Islands, programmes are currently sourced from overseas and downloaded by satellite dish (e.g. BBC, CNBC, NHK). There is no local content at this stage.

Election Coverage

88. During the course of our discussions with political parties and other stakeholders in the elections, the print and broadcast media were described as even-handed in their coverage of election issues. We were assured that all political parties had equal access to airtime and to print media. The Electoral Commission had also utilised the media for their voter education campaign. The main proviso by media groups was a user-pay policy that was applied to all candidates, election officials and others who wanted to air their views regarding the election and key issues facing the country. We did not observe any bias towards a particular party by the radio or the print media.

89. Voter education was a regular feature of the main media outlets prior to the elections. These were generated by the media industry itself, the political parties and civil society groups. The print media was able to benefit from donor funded training activities in the lead up to the elections. Feedback from the local media indicated that this sort of media training was especially useful in promoting better and more informed coverage of election issues and the election process.

Chapter 4 : The Poll and Count

General Observations on the Elections and the Electoral System

90. We found the electoral system and practices in the Solomon Islands to have a number of unique features which appear to have found broad acceptance in the community. We recognised the importance of shared values and perceptions in any society and were mindful of the recent tensions in Solomon Islands and some of the reasons that brought about these elections.

91. It was clear to us that the Solomon Islanders were looking at the election as an opportunity for a fresh start. Their desire for change, responsible leadership and good governance was verbalized openly and energetically in the press and in the numerous meetings we had. On the other hand our attention was frequently drawn to voter behaviour in the past and the effect of phenomena such as “gift giving” on voter decision-making in the Solomon Islands. Indeed it was put plainly to us by some sources that money handouts would determine the outcome of polling and that “whoever did it best close to the finish would win the day.”

92. This pessimistic forecast could not be dismissed as hollow cynicism. Gifts of money and other benefits obviously impinge ordinarily and effectively on voter decision making in the Solomon Islands. We know this because a conspicuous feature of the voter awareness campaign by elements of civic society, was the frankness of appeals to the voters “to take the money but to stick to their considered choices on election day.”

93. We were told also that intimidating pressure on the voter to support particular candidates was a common occurrence in some electorates. In small rural communities in particular, it was believed and often in fact was easy, to arrive at how voters voted in the local polling station. Propensity to device conclusions of this kind foreshadow unpleasant consequences which people under suspicion of disloyalty would want to avoid. Conceivably then the practice, of “smuggling” ballot papers out of polling booths to give to interested parties waiting outside could have as much to do with this as with monetary reward.

94. Criminal arrogance and extortion had been on the rise in Honiara and elsewhere as a direct result of the large number of illegal weapons in private hands. The question naturally arose whether fire power certain people were known to possess was serving as an impediment to the free expression of individual political choice.

95. We saw press coverage of a candidate claiming to have been threatened and pressured to withdraw from the electoral race. We were told emphatically however by those we spoke to that the guns in the bush would not affect the way individuals vote on Election Day.

96. Whatever the relevance of these and other factors to political voting, we were mindful that as an observer group, we did not come to Honiara to value judge the ultimate voting decision of the Solomon Islands voter, nor to condemn how supposedly the voter had been persuaded to cast his/her vote. Our task then was simply and properly to focus on the electoral process to determine whether the people of the Solomon Islands freely chose their representatives in Parliament at the 2001 elections on 5 December.

97. Exceptionally perhaps, we could feel obliged to comment in appropriate fashion, were we to observe that circumstances peculiar to these elections, compounded unduly the practices that ordinarily exist in Solomon Islands elections to the extent of perversely distorting electoral decision making. We do not feel that such a claim can be made with regard to the elections we were mandated to observe.

98. We watched for any impediments to this arising from the procedures, practices and arrangements that governed the elections of 5 December 2001. Where we considered it useful, we make suggestions which we feel could enhance the transparency of electoral procedures and the secrecy of the ballot and thereby help to deepen democracy in Solomon Islands.

Performance of Electoral Officials

99. We were generally impressed by the efficiency and courtesy of Presiding Officers and Polling Assistants. Many of them were public servants and we had been informed that they had not received their salaries for up to one month prior to the election. We were therefore impressed by their commitment and dedication in turning out as early as 3:00 am on polling day. Our Chairman and some members of our team had witnessed the training of Presiding Officers in Tulagi five days prior to Election Day. It was clear to us

on polling day that such training had been useful although we were told that some election officials, particularly in the rural areas, were trained hastily the night before the elections.

100. A manual was prepared for Presiding Officials and Polling Assistants which election officials referred to often during the course of the voting, at the polling stations observed. Election officials were mostly well briefed and had the tools required for the job. Some commented that this election was one of the best equipped compared to previous elections, partly due to generous assistance from the international community.

101. During Election Day some of us met the Chairman of the Electoral Commission and some Election Managers touring the polling centres to ensure the smooth running of the poll. All the polling stations we visited had received sufficient supply of polling materials.

The Poll and Count

102. The elections took place on December 5 starting at 7.00 am and closed at 5.00 pm. Members of the Forum Observer Group were deployed to constituencies in Malaita (Justice Catherine Davani and Filipe Tuisawau), Guadalcanal (Ulafala Aiavao), Honiara (Chairman Maiava Iulai Toma, Dr Hiroshi Ismael and Lorna McLaren) and to the Western Province (Makurita Baaro).

103. Prior to our deployment we were briefed by the Forum Observer Group Chairman and were provided checklists which provided a format of key features which we could assess in our visits to polling stations. The Group was able to cover in total 90 polling stations in 15 Constituencies.

104. We were warmly welcomed almost everywhere we went and our presence in the country was well publicised. We arrived up to two days before polling in our areas of responsibility and were able to travel as widely as logistical arrangements allowed. The practical arrangements were such that some members of our team were paired with an observer from another organisation. We spent the days leading up to polling day traveling throughout our places of deployment both to fly the flag as well as to locate polling stations. Our Group received invaluable assistance from the IPMT.

105. Polling day got off to a slow but peaceful start at 7am. Presiding Officers opened the ballot boxes for scrutiny of party agents, observers, voters and in some cases, members of the general public were invited into the polling station to witness this event.

106. The polling stations were mainly located in schools and other public buildings but some were located in private residences. In most cases, the polling stations were well laid out. However, some polling booths did not have adequate lighting as the thick plastic sheeting which screened the polling booth and which was intended to protect the secrecy of the ballot also screened out natural light. At some polling stations there was no provision for other means of light, but innovative solutions were quickly identified.

107. The decision to increase the numbers of polling stations by the Electoral Commission (to cater for about 750 voters) was a positive move that was generally welcomed by the electors whom we spoke to. It meant voters traveled shorter distances to reach polling stations to cast their votes. While there had been some concerns expressed to the Group in its earlier consultations with political parties about the inflexibility of the closing of the polls at exactly 5.00pm, on the day of the election, there were no long queues of people waiting to vote at the polling stations observed by members of the Group before closing.

108. Each candidate had a separate ballot box assigned to him/her. Each candidate was assigned a symbol which is selected from 30 approved by the Electoral Commission. The ballot boxes showed the candidates' name and symbol. The names and symbols of candidates were also posted outside the polling station.

109. Ballot papers were not required to be marked by the voters but were posted in the ballot box of the candidate of choice. To protect the secrecy of the ballot, voters voted in secret in a heavily screened polling booth (or in closed rooms) containing all the ballot boxes (one for each candidate.)

110. We were told in our discussions with the Electoral Commission, political parties and others that voters in the past were able under this system to take their ballot papers out of the polling station and 'sell' them to a candidate's agent. The person buying the ballot papers would be the last to cast his or her ballot paper and would place all the ballot papers bought earlier in the ballot box assigned to the candidate supported.

111. We were also advised that in many instances in the past unscrupulous people, once inside the polling booth, would quickly assess the number of ballot papers in each ballot box and switch the labels and symbols on the ballot boxes if they felt that their candidate was polling less votes than someone else. We were pleased to note that the Electoral Commission had taken precautions against the latter by instructing Presiding Officers to use marker pens to write the names of the candidates on the underside of the ballot boxes and secure all the ballot boxes so they could not be removed. The Electoral Commission and civil society groups also mounted a campaign advising voters against selling their votes.

112. Counting started for most constituencies, the day after the voting, the exception being in Honiara and parts of Malaita, where the counting started on the evening of Election Day. At polling stations observed, counting was done in a transparent and peaceful manner. The Chairman of the Group issued an interim statement on the day after the elections and this is at [Annex 3](#).

113. Overall, the Group was impressed with the manner in which the national elections were conducted and reports from members of the group, all of whom were deployed on election day, indicated that the elections were peaceful and successfully conducted. Despite the often very difficult transport and logistic arrangements for officials and voters, the election officials and security services were able, in our opinion, to ensure a

smooth and peaceful election. Much of the credit for this goes to the people of the Solomon Islands, as well as the support provided to the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission from donors in the preparations for the elections.

114. While the Group was of the view that the elections were conducted in a fair and transparent manner, there were some areas of concern observed which while not affecting the overall results of the elections, if addressed, could in our view improve the process. These are outlined as follows:

- Revision of the rolls that should have been undertaken yearly over the past four years as required by legislation was compacted to a single exercise with inadequate time periods for crucial steps in the process. For instance, ten days in which to object to entries or omissions in the initial published electors register did not seem to us to be sufficient in the difficult circumstances existing in the Solomon Islands. It is little wonder therefore that some voters were disappointed by the register on election day. One presiding officer told us that there were “ghost names” on the register. Turnout in the Honiara constituencies was barely 30 per cent of those on the register testifying to obvious double registration or voters not turning up. Many registered in Honiara had traveled to their home provinces to vote.
- We feel that an accurate register is key to the holding of democratic elections. An inaccurate register may disenfranchise voters and may also be open to manipulation.
- We found that the prescribed polling and counting procedures were generally followed during and at the closure of the poll. There were however technical deficiencies in the sealing of ballot boxes. Some Presiding Officers did not fully understand the prescribed sealing procedure including the proper use and purpose of the sealing wax provided. We associated neither mischief nor tampering with any of these occurrences.
- In some polling stations, key holes on the ballot boxes were not covered and some voters were trying to push ballot papers through this hole.
- There was apparent confusion amongst election officials on the ground from the late changes issued by the Electoral Commission on venues for counting.
- We visited 9 counting centres and found that the counting proceeded as prescribed in the presence of candidates’ agents and observers. The count was transparent. As voters were not required to mark the ballot paper there were few spoilt ballots. However, at one Counting Centre our team member observed that not only was the number of ballot papers without official marks unusually high, they were all in the ballot box of a single candidate. These were rejected by the Returning Officer.

- In another Counting Centre, a number of ballot papers were folded together indicating that ballot papers had been taken out and later put into the box by someone else.
- Concern was expressed by some Presiding Officers and Polling Agents that the training given to them prior to the elections was rushed and in some cases done the day before the elections.

115. We put forward some recommendations in the following section in the spirit of facilitating greater confidence in the transparency and integrity of the electoral process, and to minimise the possibility that the all-important secrecy of the ballot might in any way be jeopardised or challenged.

Chapter Five : Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

116. Our principal conclusions are as follows:

- Overall, the election arrangements provided for a free expression of will by the voters of Solomon Islands.
- Where we observed the process, we found that polling day was peaceful and that voters were able to cast their ballots in an environment free from intimidation and harassment and in a manner which provided them with the opportunity to vote for the candidates of their choice.
- Procedures prescribed for the issue of ballot papers to voters and the counting of votes were followed in a fully transparent manner.
- The physical posting of votes, because of the system, was not transparent to preserve the secrecy of the ballot.
- Shortcomings in the registration of voters resulted in inaccuracies, omissions and double registration.
- Double registration was by far the greatest shortcoming but the use of indelible ink on the left index finger of voters prevented any actual double voting.
- Notable disparities in the numbers of voters across the 50 constituencies suggest a need for a review by the Constituency Boundary Commission.
- The practice of “smuggling” ballot papers out of the polling booth was evident from the fact that papers were folded together and obviously casted together.

- The use of just one box for all ballot papers placed in a public area outside of the screened area could discourage “vote buying.”
- Overall, security measures at polling stations were adequate although in some cases appeared to be more than was needed while at others, especially in the rural areas, there was no police presence.

117. Our overall conclusion is that all those involved in the arrangements and execution of these elections should be highly commended for delivering a peaceful election at which the people of Solomon Islands were able to exercise their franchise.

Recommendations

118. The Pacific Islands Forum Observer Group is grateful to the Government of Solomon Islands for its invitation to observe the country’s elections. We take this opportunity to respectfully make the following recommendations in the hope that they would be helpful in strengthening the electoral practices and deepen democracy in Solomon Islands. We recommend that:

- Steps be taken to effect the continuous updating of the voter rolls as envisaged in current legislation. Sufficient resources be allocated to the Electoral Commission to continue work already begun in this area.
- The operations of the Electoral Commission be not confined, as at present, to the period just prior to and during elections;
- Solomon Islands consider changing the system for posting votes to the widely adopted single box system placed in public view. Adoption of such a system could enhance transparency, eliminate the “smuggling” of ballot papers in and out of polling booths and facilitate special voting that may be considered desirable in future. (eg. Absentee voting)
- Following on from the above, the Electoral Commission needs to consider a method by which those employed in the essential services during the elections including the police, doctors, polling officials, nurses, are able to exercise their franchise.
- The Electoral Commission might want to consider how to recruit women into the Commission and in senior roles in its staff to encourage greater gender balance.
- The Electoral Commission might consider avoiding the issue of last minute instructions for changes such as procedures for counting unless absolutely necessary.

119. The 2001 election is considered by many in Solomon Islands as the most important since the country’s independence 23 years ago. The recent political

disturbances had severely affected the economy and the social fabric of the country had been steadily eroded. We were therefore aware at the outset that the arrangements for the election and its execution would present a major challenge for the Chairman of the Election Commission, election officials and the people of Solomon Islands. We were warned to expect disturbances in some areas.

120. While there were some isolated incidents of violence, Election Day itself was peaceful; voters turned out to vote in large numbers (except in Honiara) in an orderly manner. In all the counting centres where we were present, the crowds that had gathered to hear the election results dispersed peacefully after the announcement of the results was made.

121. The success of these elections is a credit to the people of Solomon Islands. We were touched by the seriousness and the enthusiasm with which Solomon Islanders approached the whole exercise, particularly in the rural areas. There was an obvious strong mood for change. This is the first step on a path to a fresh start following the recent serious problems in the country and we are very much aware of the great and urgent need for continued assistance to Solomon Islanders as they continue to move their country forward.

Acknowledgments

122. We wish to thank the Government and people of Solomon Islands for the invitation to participate in such a historical and crucial process for the development of Solomon Islands.

123. We also wish to place on record our appreciation to the Chairman of the Electoral Commission and Election officials, Heads of Forum member missions in Honiara, the Director of FFA, the Coordinator for International Observers, the IPMT and PMC in the Solomon Islands, for hospitality and assistance extended to the Group which contributed to its work.

124. Our appreciation also goes to representatives of political parties, media and women's groups and civil society as a whole in the Solomon Islands who took time to talk to us during our visit.

125. We also wish to acknowledge the competent and dedicated support provided to the Group by the Forum Secretariat support team.

Maiava Iulai Toma
CHAIRMAN

.....

Catherine Davani
OBSERVER

.....

Hirosi Ismael
OBSERVER

.....

Mendana Hotel, Honiara
11 December 2001



PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM

TERMS OF REFERENCE

SOLOMON ISLANDS FORUM OBSERVER GROUP

1. The Forum Observer Group is established by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General in response to an invitation from the Solomon Islands Government.
2. Its role is to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the Solomon Islands elections in accordance with the Solomon Islands laws.
3. The Group is to act impartially and independently. Its function is not to execute, supervise, or advise but specifically confined to observing the process of the elections.
4. The Group is to submit a report directly to the Secretary General of the Forum.

ANNEX 2

ARRIVAL STATEMENT, 27 NOVEMBER 2001

PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM OBSERVER GROUP

Solomon Islands General Elections, 5 December 2001

STATEMENT BY MR MAIAVA IULAI TOMA CHAIRMAN, PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM OBSERVER GROUP

I wish to thank the Government and People of the Solomon Islands for inviting this first ever Pacific Islands Forum Observer Group, to join international observers in monitoring your general election on 5 December 2001.

As election observers, we look forward to playing a neutral and impartial role in monitoring the election process over the next two weeks, including the actual voting on 5 December.

We are here at the invitation of the Solomon Islands Government and have been granted the independence to monitor and observe your elections. The Forum Observers will, of course, observe the laws of the Solomon Islands, and show respect for your customs and traditions.

We hope to travel widely within your country, and observe various aspects of the election process as they unfold. We want to hear your views on the process of the election, although I must make clear that we are not here to advise, promote or support anyone's political interests. It is certainly not our role to try to influence the course of the election or seek a particular outcome.

The Forum Observer Group will not interfere in any way with the election process and it has no particular interest in who might win. As observers, our role is to observe.

What matters most to us is the exercise of a free choice by the people of the Solomon Islands in determining their own government, and by extension, their future.

Following are our Terms of Reference:

1. The Forum Observer Group is established by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General in response to an invitation from the Solomon Islands Government.
2. Its role is to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the Solomon Islands elections in accordance with the Solomon Islands laws.
3. The Group is to act impartially and independently. Its function is not to execute, supervise, or advise but specifically confined to observing the process of the elections.
4. The Group is to submit a report directly to the Secretary General of the Forum.

We will soon be seeking a briefing on the arrangements for the elections, as well as contacting the Elections Office regarding its preparations and requirements. Over the next week or so, we will seek further meetings with a wide range of groups in the community, including political parties, civil society groups, non-government organisations, the media and others.

Depending on logistics and travel arrangements, the Forum Observers hope to deploy prior to election day, and visit a representative sample of polling stations on 5 December. The Observers will be trying to cover a

range of activities relating to the elections, including the campaigns, the actual voting, and the counting of votes.

The Forum Observers are drawn from several different countries. However, they are here as representatives of the 16-member Pacific Islands Forum of which the Solomon Islands is also a member. The Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Mr Noel Levi, CBE, established the Forum Observer Group following consultations with the Solomon Islands and the Forum membership.

Pacific Islands Forum Observer Group:

1. Mr Maiava Iulai Toma – Ombudsman, Samoa, and Chairman of the Forum Observer Group
2. Dr Hiroshi Ismael – Director of Health Services, former Vice-President, Federated States of Micronesia
3. Justice Catherine Davani – Judge, Papua New Guinea judiciary

Forum Secretariat Support Staff:

1. Mrs Makurita Baaro – Team Leader, Assistant to the Chair
2. Mr Ulafala Aiavao – Assistant to Observers
3. Ratu Filipe Tuisawau – Assistant to Observers
4. Ms Lorna McLaren – Assistant to Observers

The Forum Observers are scheduled to depart Solomon Islands on or about 11 December. In line with their Terms of Reference, they will report directly to the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. The Secretary General will then forward our report to the Government of the Solomon Islands, the Elections Office, major political parties involved in the elections and to other Forum member countries. Copies of the report will later be made available to the public.

27 November 2001
Honiara, Solomon Islands

PRESS STATEMENT 104/01

PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM OBSERVER GROUP

Solomon Islands General Elections, 5 December 2001

INTERIM STATEMENT BY MR MAIAVA IULAI TOMA CHAIRMAN, PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM OBSERVER GROUP

The Pacific Islands Forum Observer Group is impressed with the manner in which the national elections were conducted in the Solomon Islands on 5 December. Our communications with our teams in the field are still coming in but indicate that the elections were peaceful and successfully conducted.

The Forum Observer Group's mandate was to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the Solomon Islands elections in accordance with the Solomon Islands laws. In the lead-up to the election, the Forum Observer Group was able to consult widely with election officials, political parties, women's group, the media and other civil society groups.

The Forum Group comprised Samoa's Ombudsman, Mr Maiava Iulai Toma as Chairman; former Vice-President of the Federated States of Micronesia Dr Hiroshi Ismael; Justice Catherine Davani from the Papua New Guinea judiciary; and four support staff.

The group was able to observe the election process in parts of Malaita, Guadalcanal, Greater Honiara, and Western Province, covering numerous polling stations in 15 constituencies.

Despite the often difficult transport and logistics arrangements for officials and voters, the elections officials and security services were able, in our opinion, to ensure a smooth and peaceful election. Much of the credit for this must surely go to the people of the Solomon Islands, as well as the support provided to the Elections Office in its preparations for this important event.

There are some elements of concern that the future government may wish to address for future elections.

A number of elections officials expressed a desire to also vote in future - a majority were unable to do so on 5 December as the current elections laws require a voter (including election officials) to vote at their place of registration. In many cases, the election officials were assigned to areas outside their place of registration and, ironically, helped other voters to cast their ballots but were unable to do so themselves.

There is also room to improve the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the registration of voters.

The Forum team will shortly prepare a full report of its Observer task in the Solomon Islands and, in line with its Terms of Reference, will send this report to the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. Copies of the report will later be sent to the Forum Chairman, the Elections Office in the Solomon Islands, Forum member countries, and key institutions in the Solomon Islands. The report will later be made to the public.

6 December 2001
Honiara, Solomon Islands