

The Solomons brace for truth
Bishop Terry Brown

This is the first in a series of updates by Bishop Brown, retired bishop of Malaita, on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Solomon Islands.

On the surface, peace has returned to Solomon Islands. Many businesses are booming, the incoming planes are full of expatriates, and there is finally the desperately needed "law and order" that enables a country to prosper. Yet many feel that the country (and especially its capital, Honiara) is a time-bomb waiting to explode again, as it did in anti-Chinese riots a couple years ago. Unemployed youth continue to move to Honiara and the gap between rich and poor increases. Acts of ethnic violence continue. Is there any way the country can put to rest its unhappy past? One answer is a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Roots of the conflict

From 1999 to 2003, Solomon Islands went through a period of "ethnic tension" that came close to becoming a civil war. Solomon Islands is a small nation in the southwest Pacific with a population approaching 500,000. It has many ethnic and linguistic groups. Two of the biggest islands are Malaita and Guadalcanal. On the latter is located the capital of the country, Honiara, a city of about 60,000 people. Honiara grew out of a World War II airbase established by the United States as they pushed the Japanese off Guadalcanal at the beginning of the war.

Both the base and the town attracted many workers and their families, especially from the heavily populated island of Malaita nearby. Over the years the Malaita population spread out into the rural Guadalcanal and became much of the labour force in the oil palm and gold mining industries. There are big cultural differences between Malaita and Guadalcanal and there was increasing conflict over the years, including some killings.

Finally, in 1999, a Guadalcanal militant force, the Guadalcanal Liberation Army (GLA), attacked Malaita settlements on Guadalcanal, driving the Malaitans back to Malaita and into Honiara. At first the Malaitans did not retaliate but eventually a corresponding Malaita militant force was formed, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF). For a few months the two forces fought it out, and in the process the MEF precipitated a coup that brought down the elected government. About 100 people died in the conflict but thousands lost their homes and were traumatized in other ways.

During this time there were armed conflicts, kidnappings, torture, murders and human rights abuses on all sides, mostly on Guadalcanal but in other provinces as well, as the militant groups reached out to try to establish their control. Finally, through the work of the churches, women's groups and overseas countries, a cease-fire was called, the Townsville Peace Agreement signed, and a multinational force, the Regional Assistance Mission for Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was invited into the country to restore law and order, and give support to the judiciary, police and financial sectors.

Since the RAMSI presence (still present after six years) the country has generally been peaceful but many people have scars from the ethnic tension years—especially of loved ones killed, tortured, or missing. The government and RAMSI have pursued many of these

situations as criminal cases but often there has been no deep reconciliation between the parties. Other cases are still not known or unresolved.

National reconciliation?

For some years, Solomon Islands churches have been asking for a government TRC rather like South Africa's, to enable victims of the conflict to voice out their experiences, and also for perpetrators to offer their repentance, all in the interests of reconciliation and the peaceful future of the country.

Finally this year Parliament passed legislation to form the Solomon Islands TRC, and in late March, Archbishop Desmond Tutu came to the Solomons to launch it. The TRC has five members (three men, two women), and the chair is the Rev. Sam Ata, former dean of St. Barnabas (Anglican) Cathedral in Honiara. There are two overseas members from Fiji and Peru.

The TRC work began in August, so we are now waiting. Will it accomplish what is hoped? It has a two-year mandate and the power to travel all over the country and to subpoena witnesses. It does not have the power to grant or recommend full amnesty to perpetrators but testimony given by them cannot be used in courts, so there is a kind of limited amnesty. But will the victims come forward to testify? And will perpetrators be willing to share their stories?

Such a national reconciliation process is new for the Solomons but it happens all the time in villages and in families. I sometimes say that Solomon Islands cultures are centripetal rather than centrifugal, with people always returning to reconciliation with their community. Therefore, I am hopeful about this process.

In Solomon Islands there are three strands of reconciliation—the traditional cultures, Christianity (and other new religions) and government; reconciliation is not usually complete unless all three are deeply involved. Somehow the TRC must bring all three strands into relationship with each other to reach maximum truth-telling, forgiveness and reconciliation. Often western advisors are uncomfortable with this integration of traditional culture, Christianity and secular government, but it is clearly the Solomon Islands way.

Already there have been some difficulties. Amnesty International, for example, has criticized the limited amnesty provision, arguing that those who committed human rights abuses should not be protected in any way but rather face full criminal charges. Personally, I think this criticism is premature and ignores the other two strands of the Solomons' reality: traditional culture and the church.

Some militants have already faced court cases, been imprisoned and served their sentences, and feel that they have already paid the price of their actions; they do not want to go through the process all over again. They also argue that some politicians who were involved in (or even instigated) the conflict ("the big fish") might hide behind the TRC rather than face criminal charges.

There is also the fear that new revelations will produce new demands for traditional compensation payments, perhaps even from the government for not providing the police

services that should have protected the population from such abuse. Many of the police were also involved in the militant groups on both sides.

But in the end the process belongs to the victims of the abuses and I think that is its strength. It means that their pain will not be ignored but be given a chance to express itself. If the TRC members are good listeners and prepared to go to some of the most remote places in the Solomons under uncomfortable conditions, then I think the TRC will work. They also need to work without fear and be willing to subpoena some of the most powerful people of the country, for many are under suspicion still. And the stories of former militants also have to be taken seriously, as they did not act without cause.

The TRC was launched with the prayers of the nation. Those prayers will continue—that the TRC be good listeners and be treated with respect and cooperation; that all parties in the conflict be willing to share their stories, listen to one another, forgive and accept justice; that politicians not use the process for their own purposes; and that the rest of the world (especially our close powerful neighbours) support the process and not try to manipulate or subvert it. We ask for your prayers too.