

Solomon Islands Low (Moderate)

The 2023 Pacific Games begin on 19 November in the Solomon Islands, delayed from earlier in the year. Security will be led by the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, and supported by the Australian Police Force which has also provided support on operational planning and capacity building in advance of the event,¹ and which will remain in place until June 2024. Concerns have been raised about the risk of violence associated with the Games, and the potential for an increased security presence from China, which would create operational and strategic problems with the Solomons International Assistance Force (Australian, New Zealand and Fijian forces).² Already China has sent more police and equipment to the Solomons ahead of the Games.³

Longer term adverse ramifications of a greater Chinese security presence could include increased human rights violations and restrictions on media and other democratic freedoms, along with broader geopolitical and regional security issues. In light of China's influence on local media, the US has offered to support free and independent media in the Pacific.⁴ There is also a risk of further delays to Solomon Islands' national election, which could have the potential to inflame community tensions and lead to violence and riots.⁵ Local concerns have also been raised about inadequate healthcare for the community, questioning the diversion of funds away from basic services to the Games.⁶

Another threat to the Solomon Islands is the risk of climate-related conflict, which may place additional stress on the population and on government agencies and services,⁷ and lead to escalating internal displacement and migration, with its associated socio-economic effects. This could lead to greater urban overcrowding and demand for services, as well as potential tribal conflict in other parts of the country. With a high risk of natural disasters and sea level rises, there is also a risk of land loss, water and food scarcity, and loss of seafood supply on which almost half of Solomon Islands rely.⁸ Given the history of past armed conflict in the Solomons (The Tensions, 1998-2003), climate related impacts should be considered an exacerbating factor for future risk of atrocities.

Finally, gender inequality and violence against women continue to pose a risk factor for conflict and violence in the Solomon Islands. While women played a significant role as peacebuilders during The Tensions, they have largely been sidelined as part of official processes.⁹ Solomons researcher Ruth Maetala says women are mainly seen in community programs and do not hold power in political or governance decision-making. She says that RAMSI did not consider gender in its planning or objectives, and official processes remain male-dominated despite a WPS National Action Plan being developed (2017-2021). The continuing process for truth and reconciliation, accountability, and prevention efforts should ensure that women's participation is a key priority. Similarly, security policy must take into account the connections between high rates of violence against women and social instability, and the impact of underlying gender inequality.¹⁰

Recommendations

The Solomon Islands government should:

- Continue to work with regional partners on security, policing and other shared issues with a view to continuing peace and stability.
- Applies a human rights lens to prevent violence ahead of the 2024 national election.
- Ensures the election takes place as planned and is not further delayed, and that the roll out of elections is free, fair and transparent.
- Take a whole of government approach to implementing the WPS National Action Plan which holds departments accountable and involves the participation of civil society and women-led NGOs.

International partners should:

- Continue to support the Solomon Islands on the security agenda including via training and capacity building on human rights and atrocity prevention.
- Support the development and implementation of gender equality programs and those tackling violence against women.
- Ensure women's participation is a core priority for further joint / regional initiatives with the Solomon Islands
- Offer support for the 2024 elections as required.

¹ AFP standing side-by-side with Solomon Islands police for Pacific Games, AFP Media Release, 8 November 2023, <https://www.afp.gov.au/news-centre/media-release/afp-standing-side-side-solomon-islands-police-pacific-games>

² Lucy Albiston and Blake Johnson, Planning ahead for Solomon Islands' Pacific Games, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 16 October 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/planning-ahead-for-solomon-islands-pacific-games/>

³ Stephen Dziedzic, China sending more police, donating equipment including drones to Solomon Islands for Pacific Games, ABC News, 1 November 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-11-01/china-sending-more-police-to-solomon-islands-for-pacific-games/103048778>

⁴ Virginia Harrison, US vows to support 'free media' in Pacific as concern over China influence grows, The Guardian, 30 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/30/us-china-conflict-pacific-free-media>

⁵ Albiston and Johnson, ASPI

⁶ Chrisnrita Aumanu-Leong and Nick Sas, The Pacific Games are heading to Solomon Islands, but with gifts from China and a hospital with no paracetamol, not everyone is convinced, ABC News, 11 August 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-11/pacific-games-china-solomon-islands-australia/102706644>

⁷ Anouk Ride, Climate Change and Conflict in Solomon Islands, United States Institute of Peace, 2 November 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/11/climate-change-and-conflict-solomon-islands>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ruth Maetala, The Success and Sidelining of Women Peacebuilders in Solomon Islands, United States Institute of Peace, 19 October 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/10/success-and-sidelining-women-peacebuilders-solomon-islands>

¹⁰ Heather Wrathall and Elizabeth Kopel, Women, Peace, and Security in the Pacific, The Diplomat, 1 September 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/women-peace-and-security-in-the-pacific/>