



Solomon Islands

KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth: 1978

Population: 561,000 (2013)

GDP p.c. growth: 0.5% p.a. 1990–2013

UN HDI 2014: World ranking 157

Official language: English

Time: GMT plus 11 hrs

Currency: Solomon Islands dollar (SI\$)

Geography

Area: 28,370 sq km

Coastline: 5,310 km

Capital: Honiara

Solomon Islands, an archipelago in the south-west Pacific, consists of a double chain of rocky islands and some small coral islands. The major islands are Guadalcanal, Choiseul, Santa Isabel, New Georgia, Malaita and Makira (or San Cristobal). Vanuatu is the nearest neighbour to the south-east where the archipelago tapers off into a series of smaller islands. Its nearest neighbour to the west is Papua New Guinea.

The country comprises the capital territory of Honiara and nine provinces, namely Central (provincial capital Tulagi), Choiseul (Taro Island), Guadalcanal (Honiara), Isabel (Buala), Makira and Ulawa (Kirakira), Malaita (Auki), Rennell and Bellona (Tigoa), Temotu (Lata), Western (Gizo).

Topography: The islands are remarkable for their steep rugged mountains, of which Makarakomburu (on Guadalcanal Island) is the highest at 2,293 metres. There are also several atolls and reef islands, plus several dormant and two active volcanoes. The rivers are fast-flowing and not navigable.

Climate: Equatorial; hot and humid. During the rainy season (November–April), there are fierce tropical storms – for example, Cyclone Zoë in December 2002, which devastated the isolated islands of Tikopia and Anuta.

Environment: The most significant environmental issues are deforestation, soil erosion, and that much of the surrounding coral reef is dead or dying.

Vegetation: Forest covers 79 per cent of the land, with dense tropical rainforest occurring on most islands, this percentage having declined at 0.2 per cent p.a. 1990–2010.



There are large tracts of rough grass on the northern side of Guadalcanal and Nggela Sule. Parts of the coast are swampy, supporting extensive mangrove forests. Elsewhere, the coast is dominated by coconut palms. Hardwoods now grown for timber include mahogany, acacia and teak.

Wildlife: Indigenous mammals are small and include opossums, bats and mice. There are crocodiles in the mangrove swamps and sea turtles nest on the shores from November to February. Birdlife (more than 150 species) includes many species of parrot and incubator bird. Some 20 mammal species and 20 bird species are thought to be endangered (2014).

Main towns: Honiara (capital, pop. 63,300 in 2010) on Guadalcanal, Auki (6,800) on Malaita, Munda (4,900) on New Georgia, Gizo (4,500) on Gizo in the New Georgia Islands, Uruuru (3,300) on Malaita, Buala (2,800) on Santa Isabel, Yandina (2,600) on Mbanika in the Russell Islands, Kirakira (2,000) on Makira, Tulagi (1,700) on Nggela Sule, Taro Island (1,200), Lata (630) on Ndeni in the Santa Cruz Islands and Tigoa (580) on Rennell and Bellona.

Transport: There are 1,390 km of roads (mainly on Guadalcanal and Malaita), 2.4 per cent paved, with some 470 km of main roads, the rest private rural-access roads. The terrain is mountainous and there is heavy rainfall making road conditions unpredictable.

The international ports are Honiara (on Guadalcanal) and Yandina (on Rennell Island); other significant ports are Gizo and Noro (on New Georgia). Ferries ply between the

islands. The international airport is at Henderson Field, 13 km east of Honiara.

Society

KEY FACTS 2013

Population per sq km: 20

Life expectancy: 68 years

Net primary enrolment: 93%

Population: 561,000 (2013); 21 per cent of people live in urban areas; growth 2.6 per cent p.a. 1990–2013; birth rate 31 per 1,000 people (46 in 1970); life expectancy 68 years (54 in 1970).

About 95 per cent of the people are Melanesian, three per cent Polynesian and one per cent Micronesian (1999 census). There is a small expatriate population.

Language: The official language is English; an English-based Creole, Pidgin, is the most widely spoken language. There are more than 80 indigenous languages.

Religion: Mainly Christians (Church of Melanesia 32 per cent, Roman Catholics 20 per cent, South Seas Evangelicals 17 per cent, Seventh Day Adventists 12 per cent, United Church ten per cent; 2009 census).

Health: Public spending on health was eight per cent of GDP in 2012. The government runs six hospitals, as well as clinics and clinical aid posts. The churches run two hospitals as well as clinics. Some 81 per cent of the population uses an improved drinking water source and 29 per cent have access to adequate sanitation facilities (2012). Infant mortality was 25 per 1,000 live births in 2013

(120 in 1960). Malaria remains the main health problem.

Education: Public spending on education was 9.9 per cent of GDP in 2010. There are six years of primary education and seven years of secondary, with cycles of three and four years. The school year starts in January.

Solomon Islands College of Higher Education offers teacher training; finance, nursing and secretarial studies; and a range of technical subjects related to Solomon Islands' economy such as marine and fisheries studies, forestry and agriculture. The college also gives some first-year university courses. Solomon Islands is a partner in the regional University of the South Pacific, which has its main campus in Suva, Fiji, and a campus in Honiara, Solomon Islands.

Media: *Solomon Star* is a daily newspaper, and *Solomon Times* and *Solomons Voice* are weekly.

Radio is the main source of information for most people. Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation provides a national public radio service.

There are 46 personal computers per 1,000 people (2005).

Communications: Country code 677; internet domain '.sb'. Mobile phone coverage is limited to Honiara, Gizo and Munda. There are a few internet cafes in Honiara and Gizo.

For every 1,000 people there are 14 landlines, 576 mobile phone subscriptions and 80 internet users (2013).

Public holidays: New Year's Day, Queen's Official Birthday (June), Independence Day (7 July), Christmas Day and National Day of Thanksgiving (26 December). Each province has its own holiday, some of which continue for several days.

Religious and other festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Good Friday, Easter Monday and Whit Monday.

Economy

KEY FACTS 2013

GNI: US\$960m

GNI p.c.: US\$1,610

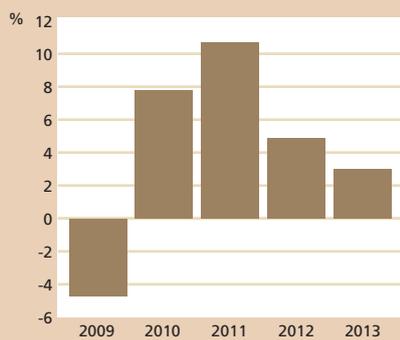
GDP growth: 4.2% p.a. 2009–13

Inflation: 5.3% p.a. 2009–13

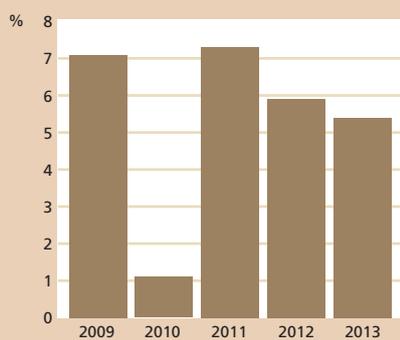
Solomon Islands' economy is based on agriculture, forestry and fisheries, which together account for around 40 per cent of GDP and provide employment for the majority of the population. GDP grew by 6.4 per cent p.a. 1979–89.

Agricultural resources are limited; only 35 per cent of the land is suitable for cultivation and

Real growth in GDP



Inflation

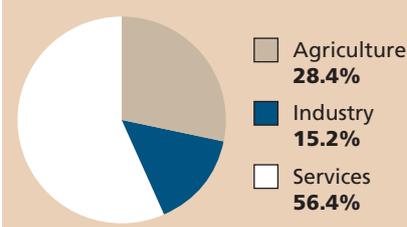


pressure on land is leading to soil impoverishment. Production can be affected by tropical storms.

During the 1990s fishing was a developing industry, encouraged by the declaration of a 320-km exclusive maritime zone. Forestry also contributed strongly, providing the dominant export product. The government was working with export partners and CDC Capital Partners to halt the depletion of forests.

Although public expenditure remained high, resulting in budget deficits and growth of public debt, economic growth was consistently good in the 1980s and 1990s until 1997 when the economy went into recession, due largely to the impact of the Asian economic downturn and consequent falls in export revenues. An economic reform programme was launched in early 1998 with the emphasis on public-spending cuts.

GDP by sector (2013)



Recovery began in 1998–99, but was soon reversed as political unrest intensified: plant and equipment, along with infrastructure, were damaged; the gold mine at Gold Ridge was closed; and the economy collapsed, shrinking by 14 per cent in 2000, nine per cent in 2001 and 2.4 per cent in 2002, when the government was depending on aid to finance both the peace agreement (including economic development of the island of Malaita) and the budget.

After six years of recession the economy returned to vigorous growth in 2003. Strong growth continued in 2004–08, averaging 7.3 per cent p.a. But the economy remained relatively small and undiversified and very dependent on exports of timber and logs. Aid constituted 67 per cent of GNI in 2010, 48 per cent in 2011 and 34 per cent in 2012, and logging has reportedly been pursued at an unsustainable rate. The strong growth of the mid-2000s was halted in the world economic downturn of 2008–09, falling from 7.3 per cent in 2008 to a contraction of 4.7 per cent in 2009, but bouncing back with strong growth in 2010–11, then moderating to average about three per cent p.a. in 2012–15.

History

Archaeological evidence suggests that the Solomon Islands have been inhabited since 1000 BCE. European penetration began in 1568 CE when the Spaniard Alvaro de Mendana, exploring from South America, spent half a year in the islands. Believing that gold was present, he gave them the name of Solomon's Islands, after the legendary King Solomon's mines. During the 18th century a

Solomon Islands on the international stage

When Cyclone Zoë swept through the Pacific in late December 2002, the island of Tikopia was the hardest hit and was left with no way to communicate with the outside world. There is no airstrip on the island, so aid from the capital – as well as international aid from New Zealand, Australia and France – took several days to arrive by ship. Early reconnaissance flights by Australia and New Zealand suggested that the level of devastation would likely mean that there had been a high death toll. However, the islanders' expertise in reading the weather meant that they had retreated to caves before the storm arrived and all had survived. For nearly a week they had lived on coconut milk and what remained of their food stocks.

few European explorers visited the Islands, but made little impression on the inhabitants who lived in small isolated communities, often at war with one another.

In the next century, as Europe's penetration of the Pacific advanced, naval ships began to call, and missionaries and traders arrived. From 1870, the islands were subjected to 'blackbirding' (attacks little different from slave raids), when kidnappers from Queensland and Fiji abducted Solomon Islanders as labour for the sugar plantations. The Solomon Islanders fought back fiercely, leading to slaughter on both sides.

In 1893 Britain made the South Solomons (Guadalcanal, Savo, Malaita, San Cristobal, the New Georgia group) a Protectorate, to which the Santa Cruz group was added in 1898 and 1899. In 1900 Germany ceded to Britain the Shortlands group, Santa Isabel, Choiseul and Ontong Java. With the establishment of the copra industry in 1908, and the spread of Christianity throughout the islands, raiding and fighting as a way of life began to die out, and mission schools provided a basic educational system.

The Solomon Islands were occupied by the Japanese army during World War II, and counter-invaded by American and allied troops. There was almost continuous fighting from 1941 to 1943, and Guadalcanal was the scene of a six-month battle which was crucial to the outcome of the war in the Pacific. The Solomon Islanders fought on the side of the allies, achieving renown for their courage in battle, and several were subsequently decorated.

After the war, the movement for self-determination gathered strength. There was political unrest in Malaita and elsewhere, which was eased by the setting up, from 1952 onwards, of local government councils, elected by universal adult suffrage.

In 1974 the governing council approved a constitution that provided for a Governor and a Legislative Assembly of 24 elected members. In 1975 the name 'British Solomon Islands Protectorate' was formally changed to the present name. On 2 January 1976 the country became internally self-governing, proceeding to full independence on 7 July 1978.

Solomon Islands came to independence under the leadership of Peter Kenilorea (later knighted), who had three periods in office, the first two consecutive. He was succeeded by his deputy, Ezekiel Alebu, in 1986. Other Prime Ministers since independence include Solomon Mamaloni, leading the Solomon Islands National Unity, Reconciliation and Progressive Party (1981–84, 1989–93 and 1994–97), and Francis Billy Hilly, leading the National Coalition Partners (1993–94).

At the general election in August 1997 Prime Minister Mamaloni's main challenger was Bartholomew Ulufa'alu, leading a new group, the Alliance for Change, comprising several small parties and independents. The new coalition won, and Ulufa'alu became Prime Minister.

In July 1998, while Parliament was in recess, Ulufa'alu dismissed Finance Minister Manasseh Sogavare and brought two members of the opposition Group for National Security and Advancement into the cabinet. Sogavare then led a group of six MPs to join the opposition, and though he could barely command a majority in Parliament, Ulufa'alu appeared determined to continue in government.

Intercommunal conflict

In the latter part of 1998, growing intercommunal tensions in Guadalcanal Province erupted into violence. The indigenous people of Guadalcanal were concerned about continuing settlement on the island of large numbers of Solomon Islanders from other islands and especially from Malaita, who dominated the national public service and the private sector in the capital, Honiara, located in Guadalcanal.

During 1999 the violence intensified and many thousands of Malaitans (including many long-standing residents of Guadalcanal) were driven to take refuge in Honiara or return to Malaita. In June a state of emergency was declared and, at the government's request, the Commonwealth Secretary-General sent Siveni Rabuka, former Prime Minister of Fiji, to broker a peace deal. Agreement was reached on restoring peace and on the longer-term achievement of a more equitable ethnic balance in the national public service and the police force. A Commonwealth peace-monitoring group was to be provided.

Commonwealth-brokered peace

Following further unrest, in August 1999 Rabuka brokered a new peace agreement

(known as the Panatina Agreement) which included a reduction in police presence in Guadalcanal Province with effect from mid-August. In September 1999 the state of emergency was ended and in October a Commonwealth peace-monitoring group began supervision of the handover of arms by the militants.

However, ethnic unrest continued into 2000, led by opposing militia – Malaita Eagle Force and Isatabu Freedom Movement. In June 2000 the Malaita Eagle Force took the Prime Minister and Governor-General captive and compelled the Prime Minister to resign. When it was able to convene a quorum of members on an Australian warship, Parliament elected Manasseh Sogavare as Prime Minister and he formed a new government.

With the support of the Australian and New Zealand governments, the warring militia and the national and provincial governments engaged in a peace process leading in October 2000 to the signing of a peace agreement in Townsville, Australia. This provided for a general amnesty for all members and former members of the militia on the condition that they hand in their arms within a given timeframe, and economic development of the island of Malaita. Former militia members were to be involved in the collection of arms and the return of law and order, and an international monitoring team was to supervise the handover of arms.

Sporadic outbreaks of violence continued. Another peace agreement was concluded in February 2001 but still there were armed militia at large and many weapons remained in the hands of former militia members.

In June 2003 Solomon Islands' then Prime Minister, Sir Allan Kemakeza, with the unanimous approval of Parliament and the support of regional leaders, accepted Australia's offer to lead an international intervention force to restore law and order. The force of some 2,200 soldiers and police from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Kiribati,

Further information

Prime Minister's Office:
National Parliament of Solomon Islands:
National Statistics Office:
Central Bank of Solomon Islands:
Solomon Islands Visitors Bureau:
Commonwealth Secretariat:
Commonwealth of Nations:

www.pmc.gov.sb
www.parliament.gov.sb
www.spc.int/prism/country/sb/stats
www.cbsi.com.sb
www.visitsolomons.com.sb
www.thecommonwealth.org
www.commonwealthofnations.org/country/Solomon_Islands

Media

Islands Business:
Solomon Star:
Solomon Times:
Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation:

www.islandsbusiness.com
www.solomonstarnews.com
www.solomontimes.com
www.sibconline.com.sb

Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu, began operations in July 2003. Its first priority was to disarm the various militias and restore order. By 2005 the force had been reduced to a few hundred.

Constitution

Status: Monarchy under Queen Elizabeth II

Legislature: National Parliament of Solomon Islands

Independence: 7 July 1978

Solomon Islands is a constitutional monarchy, with Queen Elizabeth II as head of state. The Queen is represented by a Governor-General, who must be a citizen of the country and is elected by Parliament. The National Parliament is unicameral, with 50 seats. Elections are held every four years on the basis of universal adult suffrage. The Prime Minister, who is chosen by Parliament, must be an MP; the cabinet is chosen by the Prime Minister and holds executive power.

Politics

Last elections: 19 November 2014

Next elections: 2018

Head of state: Queen Elizabeth II, represented by Governor-General, Sir Frank Ofagioro Kabui (2009–)

Head of government: Prime Minister Manasseh Damukana Sogavare

Ruling party: Democratic Coalition for Change

Women MPs: 2%

Solomon Islands' politics has been characterised by fluid coalitions of parties and independents.

After conclusion of the peace agreement of February 2001 armed militia continued to be at large and many weapons remained in the hands of former militia members. A general election was nevertheless held in December 2001. Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and the ruling People's Progressive Party (PPP) were heavily defeated, retaining only three seats, and only 19 members of the previous Parliament held their seats. The People's Alliance Party, led by former Deputy Prime Minister Sir Allan Kemakeza, won 20 seats and the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change

(SIAC) 12. Kemakeza formed a coalition with the Association of Independent Members (AIM) led by Snyder Rini (Finance Minister in the PPP government), and Kemakeza was elected Prime Minister by Parliament.

In the April 2006 election – with Commonwealth observers present – 16 members of the government lost their seats. Kemakeza retained his seat but his People's Alliance Party was much reduced while Snyder Rini's AIM did well, with 13 newly elected members. Rini was subsequently elected Prime Minister by the new Parliament. Rioting then broke out and a large portion of Chinatown in Honiara was destroyed by fire. In the same month Rini stood down when he no longer had the support of the majority of members of parliament and early in May 2006 Parliament elected Manasseh Sogavare (leader of the Social Credit Party) Prime Minister.

Sogavare was ousted in December 2007 in a parliamentary vote of no confidence, which was precipitated by the defection in November of nine government ministers. The leader of the recently established Coalition for National Unity and Rural Advancement, and Education Minister in the Sogavare administration, Derek Sikua, became Prime Minister.

In the fourth round of voting, in June 2009, Parliament elected Sir Frank Kabui to succeed Sir Nathaniel Waena as Governor-General with effect from July.

In the election on 4 August 2010 the Solomon Islands Democratic Party, led by Steven Abana, secured 13 of the 50 seats in the National Parliament; the numerous other parties won 18 seats; and independents, the rest. The Commonwealth observer group present at the election reported that the people had freely exercised their democratic right.

In the parliamentary vote that followed the general election, Danny Philip, leader of the Solomon Islands Reform and Democratic Party (a coalition of parties and independent members), was chosen as Prime Minister, polling 26 votes; his only rival, Steven Abana, won the support of 23 members.

In November 2011, following defections from the ruling coalition, Prime Minister Philip

resigned. In the parliamentary vote that followed former Finance Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo was chosen to be Prime Minister with the support of 29 of the 49 members who voted.

On 6 May 2014, in the fourth round of parliamentary voting, Sir Frank Kabui was re-elected Governor-General, when he defeated Andrew Mua (23–21 votes).

At the general election on 19 November 2014 independent candidates took 32 seats, the Democratic Alliance Party seven, the United Democratic Party five and the People's Alliance Party three. On 9 December 2014 Manasseh Sogavare was elected Prime Minister by the newly assembled Parliament; he defeated Jeremiah Manele 31:19. A Commonwealth observer group present at the general election concluded that it was conducted in a peaceful environment and voters appeared generally able to cast their votes freely.

International relations

Solomon Islands is a member of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, Pacific Community, Pacific Islands Forum, United Nations and World Trade Organization.

Traveller information

Immigration and customs: Passports must be valid for at least six months from the date of departure. Visas are required by most Commonwealth nationals. Prohibited imports include fresh fruit and vegetables, except from New Zealand.

Travel within the country: Traffic drives on the left. Visitors can drive with a foreign driving licence.

Scheduled and charter flights and ferries provide transport between the principal islands. The other islands are serviced by motorised 'canoes'. Taxis are available in Auki and Honiara; fares should be agreed before travel.

Travel health: Prevalent diseases where appropriate precautionary measures are recommended include dengue fever, diphtheria, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, malaria and typhoid.

There were 24,000 tourist arrivals in 2012.

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