

Vanuatu

a partner in fighting crime in the Pacific



With the continued support of the AFP International Network and Law Enforcement Cooperation Program, Vanuatu and other Pacific Island nations are demonstrating the success achievable through partnerships in domestic and international levels in a coordinated law enforcement effort. This is increasing security within the Pacific region and making it harder for transnational organised crime groups to operate.

Vanuatu is a small piece of paradise in the South Pacific Ocean just a three-and-half hour flight from Sydney and is home to a very friendly and peaceful population with a pristine environment made up of beautiful beaches, natural landscapes, surrounded by clear blue waters teeming with marine life.

Understandably Vanuatu is a popular tourist destination for holiday makers

from around the world, but like many Pacific Island Countries (PIC) Vanuatu is the target of transnational organised crime groups. These groups seek to exploit the multi-jurisdictional nature of the Pacific and its close proximity access to Australia, South East Asia and the US, to undertake crimes such as drug trafficking/manufacturing, people smuggling, economic crimes, child sex offences and money laundering.

Through the Vanuatu Police Force (VPF), with the support of the AFP Liaison Port Vila, Vanuatu is actively engaging and working in partnership with other regional Law Enforcement Agencies (LEA) to counter the ever growing threat of transnational organised crime. The VPF, in conjunction with the AFP and other PIC-LEA, has developed a capacity to fight transnational organised crime through the establishment of a

Members from the TCU and the AFP Liaison Officer with representatives from the provincial government and police in Longana, Island of Ambae.



regionally coordinated law enforcement effort known as the Pacific Transnational Crime Network (PTCN).

As part of the PTCN, the AFP through its Law Enforcement Cooperation Program (LECP) the VPF have established the Transnational Crime Unit (TCU), a team of dedicated law enforcement officers, drawing on resources from the Police, Customs, Immigration and other border protection authorities, working proactively to develop law enforcement intelligence and undertake targeted investigations into transnational organised crime threats.

Vanuatu, like other PICs, faces significant challenges to combating crime on both domestic and international levels. Vanuatu is a 'Y' shaped archipelago consisting of 83 islands spread out over approximately 300 nautical miles. In addition to the National Government, the islands of Vanuatu are divided up into six different provincial governments.

The six provinces of Vanuatu are Tafea, Shefa, Malampa, Penama, Sanma and Torba. Each province is made up of a number of islands with varying levels of law enforcement personnel primarily based on the main island of each province.

The capital of Vanuatu, Port Vila, is located on the island of Efate which forms part of Shefa Province.

Vanuatu has a traditional chief system which has existed for thousands of years and has a high level of respect and influence within the community. In the islands which have little or no law enforcement presence, issues of law and order fall to the chiefs who are responsible for finding meaningful solutions to serve their communities.

A fundamental element of effective law enforcement is to have meaningful and relevant engagement with the

community on all levels of government and social infrastructure.

The TCU, in partnership with the AFP Liaison Office in Port Vila, has undertaken a number of initiatives to support the VPF in developing and maintaining meaningful engagement with the Vanuatu community. Two very successful initiatives have been the development of the TCU Awareness Project and the Coast Watch Free Call service.

The TCU Awareness Project was proposed by the TCU in response to a notable lack of knowledge within the various Vanuatu LEAs, and the general community about the prevalence of transnational crime, the impact on Vanuatu and the capacity developed with the VPF to combat such activity. The aim of the project was:

1. To enhance awareness within Vanuatu's law enforcement agencies and key stakeholders in the community about the

Members of the TCU Corporal Willie Rexona (standing) and Sgt Ray Jonathan presenting to Vanuatu Police, Customs and Immigration officers in Luganville, Island of Santo.

threat of transnational organised crime to Vanuatu and the broader pacific region;

2. To inform stakeholders of Vanuatu's capacity to combat crime through the existence of the TCU and Pacific Transnational Crime Network; and

3. The role of other law enforcement agencies and the community in supporting these efforts through inter-agency cooperation, the sharing of information, and the reporting of suspicious activity to law enforcement authorities.

Utilising relevant and recent examples of police investigations in the region the VPF TCU, with the support of the AFP Liaison Office in Port Vila, developed a captivating and informative program clearly articulating these key points as well as promoting another VPF/AFP initiative known as the Coast Watch Free Call Service.

The Coast Watch Free Call service is a capacity which enables members of the public to contact the VPF and report suspicious activity from any phone located within Vanuatu. The phone service is resourced by the TCU and phone call costs funded by the AFP Liaison Office in Port Vila. This service has been highly successful with information being reported to police concerning suspicious vessels in the outer islands, inter-island drug trafficking, and the identification of suspicious individuals suspected of exploiting communities in the outer islands.



The TCU initially presented this awareness project to executives of the VPF, followed by elements of the VPF, Immigration and Customs located within Port Vila the Capital of Vanuatu. After this successful campaign the project was moved to the outer islands.

It is often said the true example of life and beauty in Vanuatu is found in the outer islands. This is certainly a well deserved adage as discovered when the awareness project was taken to each of the Vanuatu's Provinces.

Members of the TCU and the AFP liaison office travelled to main the islands of each of the provinces where the awareness project was presented to key stakeholders in the community. While

each island was different and had its special circumstances, common themes were evident. The audience was very receptive to the threat of transnational crime to the region. During every presentation members of the audience would provide examples of recent suspicious activities occurring within their province. These examples included acts of inter-island drug cultivation and trafficking, suspicious vessels, foreigners promoting various fraudulent schemes and tourists engaging in child sex offences. The audience also responded very positively to establishment of the TCU and Coast Watch Free call service. It provided a sense Vanuatu did have a capacity to combat such activity and there was a means to report it to authorities.

The Vanuatu terrain can be hard on tyres.



The audiences were always appreciative of the visit by the TCU and AFP members to their province and the time taken to engage with them on what was an important community issue. Such thanks were usually followed by a few shells of the local kava.

Kava is a traditional drink, made of the tree roots of the kava plant, which looks tastes and smells like a cup of cold muddy water. It has effects including a tingling, numbing sensation in the lips, tongue and arms of the drinker. Despite its less than appealing taste, kava has a very 'calming' effect on the drinker. Traditionally the elders of the villages would share kava at the end of day and use the time to

discuss and make decisions on issues affecting the community.

The sharing of kava between awareness project presenters and participants was an important process. It was the time when the participants most felt comfortable in interacting with the TCU members and asking questions about the material they were presenting and highlighting relevant examples in their own community.

Tanna was the first destination for members of the TCU and the AFP Liaison Office and is certainly one of the more adventurous spots of Vanuatu. Known as the island of fire, due mainly to the easily accessible and extremely active volcano, Tanna is the headquarters for the Tafea provincial government. It is also

home to modest attachment of about 20 police officers who are responsible for law enforcement for all the islands in Tafea province. The police in Tanna were extremely hospitable to TCU and AFP staff.

The next destination was the city of Luganville, island of Santo, Sanma Province. Santo, the largest island in Vanuatu, has a very interesting history and during WWII in the 1940s hosted a large US Air Force base of half a million people. One amazing feat of modern engineering is the road constructed by US forces during this time. Consisting of a mixture of coral and sand the road remains relatively flat and provides the main transport route around Santo. Santo is the northern hub for business, infrastructure and social activity in Vanuatu and is home for a large portion of law enforcement resources. It has a cargo port sufficiently large enough to accept small to medium sized cargo ships as well as cruise liners. The island of Santo is in the process of developing an international airport.

Santo's increasing ability to access the regional and global community will bring with it the increased chance for tourism and economic growth but unfortunately also the threat of transnational crime. The TCU awareness presentation highlighted the potential threats and the importance for cooperation with the TCU

Acting Commissioner Edmanley, Commander Willie Samuel and Mr Leonard Bule being welcomed to Mota Lava.



and other law enforcement elements in order to meet the growing domestic and international criminal threats.

Ambae, in the province of Penama, was a lush green paradise. It is also the source of most of the kava produced in Vanuatu for export. The Secretary-General, head of the provincial government, spoke highly of the information presented by members of the TCU and the value it provided in heightening awareness in the community of these types of crimes and mechanisms to counteract such activity. The Secretary-General hosted a traditional Melanesian feast and provided a number of tips on the etiquette of drinking kava. Kava in Penama province is prepared fresh on the day; it is smooth to drink and has relatively little aftertaste. It is however still extremely potent and if you have a shell or two don't expect to stand up or eat anything for at least four hours.

Malakula, one of the larger islands of Vanuatu located in the province of Malapa, is a popular destination for small recreation sea vessels such as yachts. Its large land mass also attracts foreign investors who wish to engage in logging and cattle farming ventures. The law enforcement community in Malakula were very receptive to the TCU members and appreciative of the time taken to meet to discuss these issues. Like many of the other islands visited by the TCU, they had instances of suspicious activity by persons and vessels visiting the numerous natural ports around the islands, but were not aware of who they could contact to get advice or support in such matters.

The VPF Acting Commissioner, Arthur Caulton Edmanley, and the Chairman of the Vanuatu Police Services (PSC) Commission, Mr Leonard Bule, joined the Senior Liaison Officer Federal Agent Tina Westra and the TCU members

on the trip to the far north of Vanuatu, namely the Torba province. Vanua Lava and Mota Lava were the two islands visited in this province. The flight to this province included island hopping to various Vanuatu islands along the way to refuel, drop off and pick up passengers. Baby 'Julie' was one such passenger. Whilst stopping over in Santo her mother handed baby 'Julie' together with some cash to the VPF Acting Commissioner in order to pay for the airline ticket and deliver 'Julie' to her father on the island of Gaua, one of the northern islands of Vanuatu. This job was swiftly delegated to the Acting Commissioner's officer, Corporal Willie Rexona, who facilitated the delivery of 'Julie' to her cheerful father on the island of Gaua.

Upon the arrival on the island of Mota Lava the Acting Commissioner was welcomed as the 'Bigman' returning to his home village for the first time after about five years. The local custom

Corporal Willie Rexona, VPF TCU member, presenting the PowerPoint for the Mota Lava community.



included the village men greeting him, painting his face with black coloured liquid and covering the Acting Commissioner in various floral adornments. There was a shell of kava offered by the village chief during the ceremony and Federal Agent Westra was honoured to be included in this traditional greeting. The norm is for women not to drink kava unless permitted to do so by the Chief. The women then cooked food and sat on grass mats most of the afternoon while the men continued to drink more kava and converse in their local language.

The TCU awareness presentations were well received in Torba and the local communities shared their concerns on a number of suspicious activities occurring in their area. This included suspected paedophile activity and an unexploded bomb being located next to a school on the island of Vanua Lava.

From the information provided by the Vanua Lava community the item

appeared to be military ordinance. The Australian Defence Force stated it could possibly be a marine marker, aircraft fare or float signal. Some of these items contain red phosphorous or pyrotechnic mixtures and most of them incorporate a high explosive scuttling charge. The AFP Port Vila liaison post passed the message to the Australian Bomb Data Centre who made contact with the Defence Liaison Staff to seek further advice. It would require a formal request from the Vanuatu Government in such circumstances seeking the support from the Australian Government (Australian Defence Force) as the item appeared to be an unexploded ordinance and is a military responsibility.

The journey to the outer islands was an extremely enriching experience on both a personnel and professional level. The face-to-face contact with the community achieved significant advances in supporting the inter-island relationships and the AFP relationship with the VPF.

When the program was completed it translated into immediate results with an increase of information flowing through to the Coast Watch free call number. As a recent example the Coast Watch number enabled one of the outer communities to report to police the activities of a foreign national for allegations of child sex offences. The TCU utilised this information to arrest and successfully prosecute a German national for child sex offences. The child sex legislation came into force in Vanuatu only a few years ago and this was the first successful prosecution under this legislation.

Through the TCU Vanuatu is playing an active and productive part in the regional fight against transnational crime.