

From tension to transition

In 2006, the Solomon Islands was in the middle of a volatile period after the election of an unpopular Prime Minister sparked rioting in the capital, Honiara. Four years and a national election later the AFP, as part of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, has helped the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force to rebuild public trust and confidence.

In late August, hundreds of Solomon Islanders gathered in a cul-de-sac at Point Cruz in Honiara. They were waiting to hear who had been declared the next Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands as a result of the national election.

Police circled the crowd, but also mingled with it. In the aftermath of the 2006 elections, Point Cruz had been a flashpoint for violence when rioting broke out. During the rampage, buildings and vehicles were torched.

So it was a relief for members of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) that in the aftermath of the 2010 election the only reason crowds were mobbing cars was to listen to the first address from their new Prime Minister Danny Philip.

In the lead-up to polling day residents of Honiara had passionately barracked for their chosen candidates by piling onto flat-bed trucks to parade through the streets of the capital.

Tooting horns, shrilling whistles, blaring music and the screech of megaphones created a cacophony of sound that accompanied campaigners as they danced through the streets brandishing the symbols of their chosen candidate.

Despite the chaos, peace reigned during the election period. This was acknowledged by the Prime Minister during his inaugural address, and welcomed by the Commissioner of the RSIPF Peter Marshall, who said the credibility of his force had been on the line.

“This is the largest operation that the 1100 members of the RSIPF have been involved in,” he said.

“They were given this responsibility many months out from the national election, they’ve trained for it and there was a lot riding on it.”

In the fortnight leading up to polling day, the community had become accustomed to an increased police presence. Sixty police were on the beat at any one time, compared to

the usual 15. Under normal circumstances, there are three police vehicles patrolling Honiara’s streets. During the election period there were 20 allocated to every shift.

These high-visibility patrols were a key component of the police-led security operation for the 2010 Solomon Islands national election.

Police from the RAMSI Participating Police Force (PPF), including a large contingent of AFP members, began planning for the operation in September 2009. A combined Public Order Management team of more than 50 people had been set up to manage worst-case scenarios, while 57 members of the AFP’s Operational Response Group were also deployed to the country.

But the majority of the policing operation was in the hands of the RSIPF. After the 2006 riots the force’s credibility had been badly dented, so it was important that the locals were seen to be leading the way in providing a policing presence and maintaining law and order during the volatile period.

01: RSIPF member William Thugea holds a ballot box with a local villager. **02:** Solomon Islands Election Commission representatives deliver ballot boxes to the Vatubolo polling station. **03:** A Royal Australian Navy vessel used during an interoperability exercise to train RSIPF, PPF and military personnel in moving vehicles and people to various locations as part of the planning operation before the election.



01



02

03



- 04:** Delivering ballot boxes involved travel to some remote locations. **05:** Voting on polling day was overseen by RSIPF and electoral officials.
06: RSIPF officers Lionel Vuthia and William Thugea, PPF Advisor Evan Davies and RAMSI Air Crewman Jerm Cutelli.
07: RSIPF, PPF and RAMSI Military personnel participate in an interoperability exercise prior to the election. Photos courtesy of Spink Mahuta.

As part of the PPF, the AFP members in the Solomon Islands worked closely with their RSIPF counterparts during the lead-up to the elections to ensure that this happened. AFP member and PPF Commander Wayne Buchhorn said the success of the operation means the RSIPF is now ready to begin taking on more responsibility for daily policing business.

“This election has been seen as a fairly significant tipping point in terms of the security environment in the Solomon Islands,” Commander Buchhorn said.

“Ideally we intend to start a transition, handing over a lot more of the day-to-day security responsibilities to the RSIPF so that the PPF will be able to focus more on capacity development.”

And with Australian Government funding committed until the end of the 2012-13 financial year, a number of these projects are already underway.

One of the most important to Commissioner Marshall is a \$20 million accommodation project funded by Australia and New Zealand. This will provide housing for RSIPF officers who

are entitled to accommodation but can't find anywhere to live, because the majority of police housing is unacceptable. The money will be used to build 150 new police houses and to refurbish others.

Already, the project has resulted in the construction of new barracks for recruits and the refurbishment of houses in

Honiara. Now, materials have arrived in the Solomon Islands to begin further building.

“You only have to look at the conditions most police officers live in and you'd be astounded. A lot of the buildings should be condemned,” Commissioner Marshall said.





"The new police houses project is fundamental to having a functioning and excelling police force. If officers have good security for their family, then they can focus 100 per cent on their work."

Another issue the housing project will help to address is the geographical distribution of police officers. With around 1000 islands across the nation, there is approximately one RSIPF member for each island. Commissioner Marshall said the program will ensure that accommodation is built across the country's nine provinces, enabling officers to live and work outside the capital.

"About 80 per cent of the people of the Solomon Islands live outside Honiara, but 650 of the RSIPF's 1100 staff live in Honiara," he said.

"I'd like to get more staff out into the provinces, and we're optimistic that it will make a huge difference to this organisation."

Education is another focus of the AFP and PPF. A pilot literacy scheme for members of the RSIPF is planned for later this year, after research showed that literacy and numeracy levels across the Solomon Islands have fallen over the past decade.

AFP member Mark Lehmann is heading the three-year, \$3.9million project. He said when the pilot course has been completed by members of the RSIPF's Learning and Development team, it will be made available to every RSIPF officer in early 2011.

"By working with Learning and Development first, we hope to create a teach-the-teacher scenario and to enable trainers to use more English in their daily teaching activities," Mr Lehmann said.

"The project could also have a positive impact on recruitment. There's the potential to identify



08: An RSIPF officer and RAMSI Air Crewman Mark Donovan delivering ballots during the election period. Helicopters landed on very small pieces of land, sometimes on cliff tops, to deliver or receive the ballot boxes.

candidates that may not meet literacy or numeracy standards during the recruiting process and provide a bridging program to get them up to speed.”

That’s welcomed by Commissioner Marshall who hopes the program will help to ensure a strong pool of recruits is available to contribute and lead the RSIPF in the future.

Following the success of the 2010 elections, one of the new Government’s first strategic decisions will be to determine funding for the RSIPF.

The PPF is currently producing a report, A True Cost of Policing, to analyse the economic benefit of RAMSI and the PPF to the RSIPF. The report should be finalised by late September.

Commander Buchhorn said it will be one of the first significant documents the new police minister will need to consider.

“We’re very conscious that we don’t build a police force which is unsustainable,” he said.

“But we also want to ensure that the people of the Solomon Islands are provided with a strong level of policing.”

Commissioner Marshall said that in the lead-up to the

election the Solomon Islands Government significantly increased funding for the RSIPF, taking security from ninth to third in the country’s priority list.

“I want to maintain that as a priority, on the basis that law and order is absolutely fundamental to the success of this country,” Commissioner Marshall said.

“Unless you’ve got law enforcement, this place is not going to prosper.”

The RSIPF, under the mentoring of the AFP through RAMSI and the PPF, will continue to evolve. This will begin with a review of the RSIPF Police Act, which is likely to take several years. However, as part of its transition to taking sole responsibility for policing in the Solomon Islands, the RSIPF

is also conscious of a need to address what has happened in the past.

The PPF is helping to organise a national day of reunification for the RSIPF. This may take place in November, and will see every member of the police force reaffirm their oath of office.

“Hopefully that will be a cathartic process for the members of the RSIPF,” Commander Buchhorn said.

“But it will also play a symbolic role in terms of its relationship with the community, helping to further rebuild the trust and confidence which it lost so significantly during the 2006 tensions. Basically, this is about drawing a line in the sand to say we are now moving forward.”

