



# Toward a new partnership

An effective, capable and confident Royal Solomon Islands Police Force is taking its place in a new partnership with the Participating Police Force.

It was hard to escape the fact that a celebration was brewing in Solomon Islands. Billboards throughout Honiara heralded the coming 10th anniversary of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Radios chattered incessantly with well wishes from citizens. Honiara buzzed with the constant hum of a seemingly endless stream of traffic.

“The changes are dramatic,” says AFP Federal Agent Steve Hardy – one of the first AFP members to deploy with RAMSI in 2003. “Out on the streets of Honiara, people are far more relaxed.” Even the traffic, he says, is evidence of a new confidence.

“Yesterday, I was held up in a traffic jam in Honiara while a parade went through,” Federal Agent Hardy continues. “There are two issues. One, there are enough vehicles on the road nowadays to have a traffic jam. Secondly, that a youth parade of about 2000 young people went past. That event wouldn’t have happened in 2003. People were too fearful of assembling in any numbers at all.”

This new confidence is brewing everywhere. Funding was recently approved to extend RAMSI for another four years until 2017. Even so, the Pacific Islands Forum Ministerial Standing Committee met on 21-22 May and a potential “transition to bilateral assistance arrangements” was on the agenda for discussion.

Solomon Islands’ Permanent Secretary for Police and National Security Eddie Sikua is a good

barometer of that change in attitude. As late as 2010, the then RSIPF Deputy Commissioner says after the 2006 election “we felt things might not be going well”.

Like RAMSI and the Participating Police Force (PPF), the impending 2010 elections weighed heavily on the RSIPF. “Certainly in 2010,” Mr Sikua says “our thinking was ‘while RAMSI is still here, what is the RSIPF doing to step up when RAMSI goes’.”

By contrast, as the 2010 election passed successfully it was a watershed for the RSIPF. Since then, a different RSIPF has emerged and developed. The old RSIP of 2003 no longer exists. In 2013, Mr Sikua says “all that has now changed”.

“I think the opportunity is here now – not only for the RSIPF but for the Solomon Islands – to move forward. The ball is in the Solomon Islands’ court for peace and prosperity.”

## Transition

The fifth Commander PPF, Wayne Buchhorn, says “it’s hard now to remember how much pressure was on the RAMSI mission and the Solomon Islands’ Government and the local people to have a safe, fair and free election”. Commander Buchhorn arrived in mid-2009 when capacity building projects were well under way. The PPF was still actively involved in frontline policing. Combined RSIPF, PPF, and

The successful 2010 Solomon Islands national election was a watershed moment for the nation and the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force.





military ‘x-ray’ patrols were effectively delivering law and order. But as the August 2010 election got closer the election “became the focus”.

“Everyone in Solomon Islands was very much aware an election was coming,” he says. “The country needed to get the election done and dusted safely and peacefully.” He says numerous briefings were delivered to various forums as the security planning for the election progressed. In effect, the security planning had a significant flow on effect of engendering confidence and allaying some rising concerns in the lead up to the election.

“When a successful election did occur,” he says, “we were very pleased – for both the RAMSI and PPF planning and for Solomon Islands and its people.

“Importantly, it was significant for the development of the country. Solomon Islands had gone through an election process and a change of government in a peaceful manner. That was a significant milestone.”

RAMSI and the RSIPF now built on that momentum. Much new work would be progressed in the next two years:

- **Review of the Police Act.** The intent was to update the Act to create a contemporary model for the RSIPF. The review of the Act passed through the Solomon Islands Government this year.
- **Review of the RSIPF structure.** Before the review, one assistant commissioner was responsible for about 60 per cent of RSIPF staff. An updated structure would provide a wider spread of responsibilities and build in better accountability.
- **Transition Plan.** A formalised plan for the PPF to withdraw from the provinces and hand over frontline policing to the RSIPF was developed. To date there are now just two provinces with PPF advisors.



## Police Accommodation Project

But chief among the new programs was undoubtedly the Police Accommodation Project. The determination of successive PPF commanders to make this project a reality illustrates just how critical it was. The housing program effectively underpinned the continued operational development of the RSIPF.

Police housing was a service entitlement in Solomon Islands. Even so, existing housing had deteriorated to such an extent by 2003 (and after) that many police either worked from available government office space or from their own homes.

Funding for police transfers throughout the provinces also had long since dissipated by the time RAMSI arrived. Without an effective posting cycle, police officers and their families had become integrated into the local communities. What was designed as a benefit of service had actually contributed to the deterioration of police effectiveness.

“We were saying ‘you have got to be a disciplined force, turn up on time and look sharp,’” Commander Buchhorn says. “That’s all well and good but you have got to recognise the operating environment. If the police didn’t have a sufficiently comfortable family



New police housing is providing a solid foundation for stable policing throughout Solomon Islands.



Old and new: the new Isabel Provincial Headquarters in Buala is one of seven new headquarters already provided under the mantle of the Police Accommodation Project and inset: the old Buala Police Station.



“I don’t see how they can be a fully functioning independent police force unless they can be trusted to have an armed capability again and protect their own national security.”

existence then it is really not surprising that it impacts on the way they perform.”

With funding available, delivering 146 police houses throughout Solomon Islands began. Additionally, flexibility in the application of funding within RAMSI programs meant that new police headquarters in Solomon Islands’ nine provinces would also be possible. Seven of those new headquarters are now in place.

The PPF Coordinator Capacity Development and Monitoring, Corporate Service and Infrastructure David Quayle says the impact was immediate. “There is no way our other projects could have gone ahead without secure new facilities,” he says.

“The new buildings are secure, they have gates and fencing and that enables us to confidently install VHF and HF communications networks and all the associated expensive equipment securely.

“In addition, it provides secure storage for the mobility program where we are rolling out a number of boats and vehicles. So we couldn’t do those things without having that critical infrastructure in those key provincial centres.”

Essentially, the project provided a springboard for the administrative, logistical and operational development in the provinces. In turn, it further enabled the drawdown of the PPF and the transition of frontline policing to the RSIPF. In essence, it paved the way for the RSIPF to re-establish the formal law and order role in Solomon Islands.

## Looking to the future

Post 2010 election, the RSIPF is in the process of what present Commander PPF Paul Osborne calls the ‘professionalisation’ of the force. Capacity development and project delivery continue unabated and remain core day-to-day functions. A key additional factor is the mentoring program now that the PPF has withdrawn from most police posts and active frontline policing role.

Commander Osborne says a new police force is emerging. Sixty five per cent of the current RSIPF members were not in the force during the tensions. Additionally, 10 years of concentrated capacity development is producing a new type of police officer. “So it’s new, it’s developing a new culture and a new ethos and, hopefully, a good civilian policing ethos.”

Capacity development has been hugely successful, often instigating secondary outcomes. The rise in expertise of locally grown commercial project management during the Police Accommodation Project was unexpected. It actually allowed RAMSI members to relinquish hands-on daily management.

But it is the RSIPF’s delivery of core law enforcement outcomes throughout Solomon Islands that is the most spectacular success. “The RSIPF we see now is rapidly becoming equal to any other Pacific police force,” Commander Osborne says. “I suspect that in some of the areas where we have developed their capabilities and capacity they are actually superior.”

The Family Violence Program established at Buala in Isabel Province is a classic example. Provincial Training Officer Sergeant Josiah Laumana says the project was a joint RSIPF and PPF outcome. When the PPF withdrew in 2011, it was Sergeant Laumana’s job to continue the program in his dual role as the Family Violence Coordinator.

He says the program began in response to the numerous complaints of domestic violence. “Family violence is a big issue because people think it is part of the customary culture,” he says.

Workshops were conducted throughout the province. Up to 40 candidates were selected from the villages to attend. It was their job to take the messages back to their respective villages.

“The issue here is if you assault your wife or your husband it is not a cultural issue it is a criminal offence under Solomon Islands’ law. People didn’t understand that. But when we talked to them they realised – it’s no longer a private matter it’s a crime.”

The program has been so successful that the model has been implemented in Choiseul and Malaita provinces. Commander Osborne says it has been one of the most gratifying programs during his tenure. He says a briefing he attended with present RSIPF acting Commissioner Juanita Matanga was illuminating.

“The police in Buala put up a list of questions the communities are actually asking them face-to-face. They were very sensitive issues and very specific, sensitive questions. The communities were prepared to open up to the police.

“That wouldn’t have happened three years ago,” he says “but they are doing that now. It shows me that they



More than 900 Royal Solomon Islands Police Force members are now trained in public order management.

have confidence in the police, that they want the police involved in cleaning up those problems. The statistics now show that is the case.”

There are still challenges.

“We have got another four years” Commander Osborne

says “but there are no

guarantees after that”. The 2014 election will be the first where the RSIPF is the lead law enforcement agency. Meanwhile, a range of programs to increase mobility, infrastructure, vessels and vehicles, and focus on administrative support areas will continue the process of professionalisation.

Even so, there are still two areas that Commander Osborne says need a particular focus – rearmament and leadership. He says that the process of rearming with non-lethal force is already under way. But the issue of rearming the police with some degree of lethal armaments is still a concern in the community.

“It was abundantly clear the military would be leaving” when Commander Osborne deployed as commander in 2011. But it was also evident that the RSIPF was not then ready to take over some of the security responsibilities when the military left.

Commander Osborne says the Transition Plan 2011-2013 addressed those important issues, such as rearmament.

“I don’t see how they can be a fully functioning independent police force unless they can be trusted to have an armed capability again and protect their own national security.”

The transition strategy set forth a program in operational safety training and public order management. In two years, the RSIPF has gone from a police response team of 12 members to 470 fully trained riot police. The RSIPF can now field 260 fully equipped riot police at any time. Additionally, there are now 900 officers trained in handcuffs, batons and pepper spray, which they now wear in public.

“I know I am leaving here,” Commander Osborne says “and the RSIPF, with the PPF, will be able to contain almost any security situation.”

Leadership is now one of the final issues that must be addressed by the RSIPF. Commander Osborne

says “The RSIPF leadership has got to take the next step,” not only to manage effectively but to embrace accountability and guard against corruption, “They have got to stand above that.”

Commander Osborne is quick to add that there are many leaders who are beneficiaries of the 10 years of direct PPF influence and are ready to lead. He says Mr Sikua and Assistant Commissioner Matanga have both benefitted from the PPF leadership programs.

RSIPF Acting Commissioner Juanita Matanga is the first woman appointed to the rank of assistant commissioner since independence in 1978. As director of Human Resources in 2008, she was instrumental in addressing gender issues and reforming “a significant lack in fairness and competition” between male and female members of the RSIPF.

As the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations unfold in Solomon Islands, Commissioner Matanga says recognising what is needed in the next four years and beyond is the best way of recognising what happened in the past. “I am confident the RSIPF can move forward from the work that has been done in the last 10 years,” she says. “I do have confidence that the RSIPF can do it.”

Mr Sikua is also confident that the RAMSI model can be sustained – not only in Solomon Islands but, if needed, throughout the South Pacific region. RAMSI, he says, has facilitated a relationship with more than 200,000 people from participating countries. On the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary he says it is a good opportunity to say thank you.

“I think it has been an exciting 10 years. From the RSIPF perspective we have travelled together these 10 years. Whether we have walked or crawled, we have all walked and crawled together.”