The RAMSI Legacy for Pacific Policing

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Introduction

While most aspects of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) have been well documented, less has been said about the significant contribution of the Pacific Island police who served with it. Pacific Islanders undertook important civilian roles, but the largest numbers were deployed to RAMSI’s Participating Police Force (PPF). Although the bulk of the PPF were from Australia and New Zealand, approximately one-fifth were Pacific Island police — referred to as the Pacific Island contingent (PI contingent) — from 13 countries: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Their contribution underscored the mission’s regional nature and sustained support for RAMSI.

Drawing on more than 100 interviews, this In Brief summarises preliminary findings from a research project supported by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) that has been examining the experience and impact of RAMSI’s PI contingent on its individual participants, their home police organisations, and on regional policing more broadly.

Contribution of the PI Contingent: Cultural and Community Engagement

PI contingent members interviewed stated they often took the lead in reassuring and communicating with local communities affected by the Tensions, as well as participating in other policing activities, including operations to support investigations, arrests, domestic violence response, and public disorder management. They identified their main contribution as providing culturally sensitive engagements with communities, and supporting and building the confidence of Solomon Islands police, especially new recruits, through modelling professional standards and practices.

Significantly, Pacific Island officers described themselves as critical intermediaries between their Australian–New Zealand PPF colleagues and Solomon Islanders through their proficiency in ‘translating’ across language, cultural, and policing differences. This was the case in community policing situations, but also in risk analysis when confronting civil unrest, and in responding to tragic incidents such as the community reconciliation following the shooting of a villager by a Tongan military member of RAMSI. While Pacific Island police were confident in their abilities to mediate such differences, they struggled with some of the mission’s operating procedures. For example, a ni-Vanuatu officer working at a provincial police outpost described his frustration at PPF rules that prohibited him accepting gifts of food from local Solomon Islanders during community visits. He pointed out that refusing gifts of food went against local custom and could hinder the development of police relations with the local community. PPF policy remained unchanged on this matter, although it was often subverted. Nevertheless, Pacific Island police continued to press the importance of police directly engaging with key social institutions. This is reflected in their successful bid to have police attend church in uniform; a move not only approved by PPF command but in the later stages a practice adopted by top-ranking Royal Solomon Islands Police Force officers. This community-focused approach to policing by PI contingent members on general duties in Honiara and at the outposts drew on their strong affinity with, and acceptance by, Solomon Islanders.

As the PPF reduced its frontline operations in the later stages of the mission, PI contingent members had fewer opportunities for community engagement, often being deployed as security at RAMSI’s base on the outskirts of Honiara, or in office-based support positions at the police headquarters and training college in Honiara. However, their involvement in tasks such as developing training modules, management and evaluation systems provided opportunities for the acquisition of new skills and knowledge that later benefitted personal and home force development.

Impact on Professional and Personal Development

Many PI contingent officers highlighted the experience and skills they gained through the pre-deployment training undertaken at the AFP’s Majura facilities in Canberra. There were more mixed responses to their operational experience in Sol-
Box 1

Professional and personal benefits identified by PI contingent members include:

- gaining new, or building existing, skills useful for policing (for example criminal investigations, technology use, report writing, and logistics)
- acquiring and improving language and writing skills
- boosting professionalism, for example procedures to support standard operating procedures, command and control, and appropriate use of force
- strengthening gender equity through targeted training and mentoring of women police officers by Australian, New Zealand, and experienced Pacific islands police personnel; subsequently through friendships and networks
- building self-confidence, for example leadership training and developing communication skills
- enhancing personal and professional deportment
- acquiring a greater appreciation of occupational health and safety (including malaria prevention, diet, exercise, and the detection of diabetes)
- enabling greater financial security, for example, paying off debt or investing in further education
- gaining an opportunity to travel and learn about other countries and police organisations.

Organisational Change and Learning

From a professional point of view, the post-deployment experience was often viewed as less satisfying. Many interviewees contrasted the extremely well-funded and well-organised RAMSI environment to the many challenges facing them on their return home. One officer described her time in the PI contingent as ‘being in heaven’ and said she had found it hard to settle back into her old position, and to the multiple and ongoing challenges of working in a police organisation that was less well resourced and less effectively managed.

Many factors influenced differences in the impact on Pacific Island police forces, not least the huge variation in force size and professionalism. The gains from RAMSI participation were most noticeable in smaller police forces, some of which developed new standard operating procedures, training modules, and stronger ties with regional police organisations. This finding is worth testing further to see how it might be applied in future policy initiatives.

RAMSI’s contribution to regional policing was more often remarked upon by the most senior officials, including former RAMSI leaders and current Pacific Islands Police Commissioners. Among those highlighted were RAMSI’s contribution to enabling and supporting regional policing cooperation, and building individual Pacific Islands’ police force capacity to deliver training. The benefits of regional collaboration included a strong sense of identity as PPF participants and as ‘brothers and sisters’ in the regional police community. Tangible examples of increasing engagement and involvement in regional networks include ongoing contacts through the Women’s Advisory Network that operates under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police, and the Pacific Network of Transnational Crime Units.

Conclusion

The experience and impact on individual PI contingent officers differed according to three main factors: the timing of their deployment, their policing experience, and their home country and policing organisation. In particular, assessing the impact on the different Pacific Island police forces must be tempered by the very different home contexts in which they operate, and the size, culture, and capabilities of each force.

The benefits of the PPF experience for the Pacific region and its policing forces have been cumulative and diffuse, and have provided a base on which to build future policy initiatives. The forging of personal links and direct experience of working together have enhanced the potential for region-wide programs, elevated policing standards, and built capacity.

Sustaining the benefits following RAMSI members’ return to their home forces remains a significant challenge and could have been more aggressively and strategically pursued through post-deployment initiatives and networking. Even so, the mission had positive multiplier impacts on policing throughout the region, as well as its acknowledged contribution to restoring law and order to Solomon Islands. Now that RAMSI has ended, serious attention is needed on how to sustain these gains.

Author Notes

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