

Foreign officers are not the answer to PNG's policing problems

by Sinclair Dinnen and Miranda Forsyth

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With the aim of restoring confidence and discipline in the constabulary, PNG Prime Minister **James Marape recently proposed** recruiting around 20 foreign officers to take up leadership positions in the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary (RPNGC). Some of these would work at police HQ in Port Moresby, while some would be provincial police commanders.

The PM also announced the establishment of a new special police unit, to be called the Anti-Terrorism and Domestic Force, to address “terrorist-like” incidents such as kidnapping. The unit will be “unnamed”, “invested with lethal force” and, seemingly, not subject to normal rules. Penalties will also be increased for initiating tribal fights.

These measures were announced as alarm grows about violent crime and localised conflicts in parts of the Highlands, including kidnapping by criminal gangs and ongoing armed conflicts, entailing sophisticated firepower, mercenaries and military-style tactics. These have resulted in multiple fatalities, widespread rapes, destruction of property and gardens, and population displacement. Enga Province has experienced the worst violence, with **up to 150 people killed** in August according to provincial police commander George Kakas. There is no doubt there is a significant, and seemingly escalating, problem of conflict and violence in the country.

But are the solutions proposed by the PM likely to help or to exacerbate the problem?

While continuing to be framed as “law and order” problems demanding muscular policing and law enforcement solutions, the fighting is occurring in what are active conflict zones. In many parts, messy local wars are being waged by gunmen armed with high-powered weapons operating within shifting coalitions of groups and alliances. Is it realistic or appropriate to expect police – trained to manage crime – to respond to socially complex small-scale warfare?

There is scant evidence that tough “law and order” approaches involving special

policing operations can, on their own, stop the kinds of conflicts being experienced in the Highlands today. On the contrary, violent responses by ill-disciplined mobile squads can have **counter-productive outcomes**, prolonging or escalating conflict rather than ending it.

In considering the call for foreign police, it is also helpful to reflect on the history of this kind of engagement. Australia has been providing capacity building to the RPNGC since the late 1980s. With a strong focus on training, this assistance is currently provided by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) under the **PNG-Australia Policing Partnership**.

A more robust form of policing assistance occurred under the short-lived Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP) in 2004, where uniformed Australian police officers were sworn in as members of the RPNGC to work alongside their local counterparts. Although signed off by the PNG government and popular among the broader community, the ECP offended nationalist sentiments among elements of the political elite as well as resentment among some in the RPNGC. Luther Wenge, then governor of Morobe and a former national court judge, mounted a successful constitutional challenge. Australian police had to be withdrawn after PNG's Supreme Court ruled in 2005 that the legal immunities they had been granted were unconstitutional. Since then, the AFP have worked as advisers to the RPNGC rather than in an executive policing capacity.

Periodic calls have been made for a **return of uniformed Australian police**, particularly in light of the deteriorating situation in the Highlands. However, without the immunities they demand to participate in international policing missions, the AFP are unlikely to agree. Likewise, it seems unlikely that PNG's political leaders will agree to amend the country's constitution to allow for another ECP-type policing intervention.

The current proposal to appoint foreign personnel to serve as senior officers within the RPNGC is an attempt to circumvent these constitutional and political difficulties. However, there is no guarantee that such appointments will not generate the same kind of resentments as the earlier ECP. There is also the question of who will pay for these foreign officers. With the RPNGC facing endemic fiscal constraints, expending scarce government resources on foreign personnel is unlikely to go down well.

Employing 20 foreign officers is also unlikely to address one of the major challenges for the RPNGC, namely their small size and thin presence in many rural areas. Speaking earlier this year, Internal Security Minister **Peter Tsiamalili Jnr said** there were only around 5,600 uniformed officers in PNG, which translates into a police to

population ratio of around 1:1,854. This is well below that of **comparable Pacific Island countries** (Solomon Islands 1:500 and Fiji 1:550).

Arguably a more helpful way of spending a policing budget would be to increase the numbers of police on the ground. Supporting them to work in productive, reliable and mutually supporting relationships with local communities is also a good idea. As **discussed previously**, reactive policing is expensive and extremely difficult, given the divergences in scale of manpower and weaponry between police and the armed groups.

However, there is a large preventive role to be played by police carrying out their normal policing duties in a reliable manner. We know that many intergroup conflicts are sparked by individual transgressions that go un-responded to by the state – a drunken brawl, or an act of sexual violence. Quick responsiveness to such incidents may put out small fires before they have a chance to gather heat.

In addition, development of **relational networks and coalitions** by police and civil society can supplement the manpower and local knowledge needed to manoeuvre in volatile contexts. While foreign senior police might have some advantages in terms of technical skills and immunity from RPNGC factionalism and politics, they would find it much harder to navigate the social complexities on the ground where local knowledge is critical to effective policing interventions.

Overall, performative and simple solutions are unlikely to be helpful in resolving complex problems such as intergroup fighting. A holistic response addressing some of the underlying drivers and the patterns of violence is more likely to make headway. The police undoubtedly have a role to play, but it is more likely to be found in modelling local, respectful, reliable adherence to the rule of law, than in importing foreign officers and resorting to unaccountable heavily armed squads.

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