

## **Armed and Dangerous: the crisis in Papua New Guinea**

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The plundering of police and army arsenals has led to African levels of communal violence in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Until recently, hundreds of clans fought with spears, bows and arrows, and axes, but now the highlands echo daily to the sound of gunfire, including machine guns, according to research conducted by the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey.

As a result, the death toll is spiralling, although no accurate figures are available, because there is no effective police presence in the area. Philip Alpers, who conducted the research, estimates that as little as 2 per cent of murders are reported.

The carnage in the Southern Highlands, and elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, is shaping up as the gravest test yet for Australia's policy of intervening to revive failing Pacific states such as the Solomons and PNG.

It poses a challenge for the federal government's five-year, \$850-million Enhancement Co-operation Program, designed to bolster PNG's failing police and public service by the injection of Australian personnel. Many of the 210 Australian federal police seconded to PNG under the program have been deployed in secessionist Bougainville and in Port Moresby. But redeployment of Australian police to the highlands is not scheduled until 2006.

Earlier this week Prime Minister John Howard warned of uneven progress in helping to rebuild institutions in PNG. Delivering the inaugural Lowy Institute for International Policy lecture in Sydney, Howard said the Enhancement Co-operation Program was strengthening law enforcement, tackling corruption, and assisting with reform of the economy and public service.

However, "a note of realism is called for. We should not underestimate the depth and complexity of the problems faced by PNG and other Pacific states. Progress will likely be uneven and will only be made if all parties accept ownership of solutions to institutional weakness", Howard said.

Howard will visit Port Moresby later this year to stress that Australia is engaged for the long-term. Around the same time the Small Arms Survey Report on violence in the Southern Highlands will be published. This will also coincide with the holding of a gun summit in Goroka, to be attended by representatives of the PNG and Australian governments, and what remains of the area's viable political representation.

Proposals to disarm people will be discussed but there is scepticism about local willingness to confront a crisis that has already led to a Somali-style descent into violent anarchy in some regions. Last year, The Age reported that a Price Waterhouse audit of the Southern Highlands provincial government revealed that senior officials, including national MPs, were complicit in an "astounding and sinister" diversion of public funds. Almost all of the province's \$15 million revenue has disappeared.

The audit found that nearly \$2 million went to a Queensland-based company linked to the provincial governor for work on hospitals that was never carried out. It also criticises the local bank manager of an Australian bank for improperly clearing a cheque which the recipient said was a pay-off for ballot-box rigging.

To deter communal violence from spreading there has been a rapid escalation of Australian involvement in South Pacific states. It began with a commitment to the Solomons. The Regional

Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) comprises 260 police, mainly from Australia, but also includes law enforcement officers from New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, Papua New Guinea, Cook Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Vanuatu and Nauru.

These have been supported by up to 250 Australian troops, although numbers have been scaled back.

So far, RAMSI has been largely successful in combating gun-rule in the Solomons but, as Alpers says, the challenge in PNG is "RAMSI times 10". Alpers, an adjunct associate professor at the School of Public Health, University of Sydney, and previously a senior fellow at the Harvard Injury Control Research Centre in Boston, says the proliferation of guns means the Southern Highlands is now a "tinder box".

Crime statistics, notoriously unreliable even in the cities, show the recorded murder rate in PNG has risen to six times that of Australia. The country's capital, Port Moresby, reports a murder rate 42 times that of Sydney.

Although most gun homicides, armed robberies, and pack rapes at gunpoint go unpunished, the proportion of inmates imprisoned for gun crime, at least in the Southern Highlands, is high, according to research conducted by the Small Arms Survey.

In the Southern Highlands, at least 90 per cent of murders are not reported to authorities and non-fatal gunshot wounds are similarly under-reported. In the area's Tari Basin, according to Small Arms Survey Research, the risk of violent death by any method is at least 100 times higher than in Australia.

The Small Arms Survey is an independent research project located at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. Established in 1999 with the financial support of the Swiss federal Department of Foreign Affairs, it receives additional funding from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and Britain.

There are an estimated 639 million small arms in circulation worldwide, according to a Small Arms Survey report in 2002. Gunshots cost 500,000 lives each year. Of these, 300,000 people die in regional conflict and 200,000 in interpersonal violence and suicide.

The PNG's Southern Highlands has become an extreme example of this waste of human life. A mile or so above the malarial coastal swamps, in the cool and fertile valleys of PNG's mountain range, highlanders number 2 million, or 40 per cent of the country's people.

The rapid proliferation of small arms, their lethal role in tribal warfare, and the disruptive effect of illicit guns on the delivery of essential services, now rank among PNG's most acute problems.

The current crisis has its origins in the run-up to PNG's independence more than 30 years ago. Australia donated large quantities of rifles, revolvers and machine guns, and ammunition, to equip PNG's new police and military forces, correctional and other services.

According to the Small Arms Survey, shipments included 5463 Australian SLR semi-automatic assault rifles, plus many hundreds of L2A1 Automatic Rifles, Bren light machine guns, F-1 submachine guns, Browning semi-automatic pistols, mortar tubes and other small arms donated to the fledgling PNG army. Local armouries also received .38 S&W revolvers and F-1 submachine guns from Australia. More than 10,000 small arms have been imported into PNG, with Australia the largest supplier.

As violence and anarchy spread in PNG so, too, did reports of foreign gun runners smuggling in weapons. These vaguely sourced reports served the purpose of distracting attention from the main sources the PNG army and police force. According to Alpers, there has been an "alarming" rate of theft from state armouries.

Inventories of these armouries are now being undertaken and the early results suggest the theft problem has reached systemic proportions.

According to Alpers, the "most destructive firearms used in crime and conflict in the Southern Highlands were supplied by police and soldiers within PNG. Virtually all the high-powered weapons we saw, or which were described to us, were firearms originally issued to the country's own military and law enforcement agencies. At all levels of discussion in PNG, it's no secret that politicians and civil servants are implicated in the domestic small arms trade".

Following the last election, then prime minister Mekere Moruta conceded that MPs had supplied guns and fomented election violence. He said: "Where disruption took place the participation was universal, it became a survival game for every candidate. It became a modus operandi."