



Think, Act; Plans to update Solomons Police Act

With the process of updating a 40-year old Solomon Islands Police Act now underway, **TOM PERRY** looks at how this important reform will help shape the future direction of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force.



Proud police officers...now the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force is considered a genuine employer of choice in the Solomons. *Photo: RAMSI*

Protests in Honiara during the election of new Prime Minister, Gordon Darcy Lilo late last year, provided an important barometer for the effectiveness of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force.

As the situation soured and some 500 angry youths began to make their way through town, it was officers of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF)—not RAMSI's Participating Police Force (PPF)—that took the lead in quickly dispelling the disturbance, dispatching and arresting rock-pelting, would-be rioters before any real harm was done.

For observers and the community at large, it was a proud moment and a sign of how much things have changed. Eight years ago, when RAMSI was first deployed to the not so Happy Isles, this sort of confidence—both within the community and amongst the officers themselves—seemed a long way off.

Back then, it was RAMSI who took the front-line in policing, whereas now almost all RAMSI officers serve solely in training, administrative or 'capacity building' roles within the RSIPF.

And it is not only on the front line of policing that the community is seeing significant change. The RSIPF is now considered a genuine 'employer of choice' in Solomon Islands.

With an impressive Academy programme and the construction of new houses for RSIPF officers, police force applications are rising dramatically with applications jumping from over 500 in 2010 to more than 800 last year.

This reflects the increased perception that

RSIPF is a strong, trustworthy and family-friendly organisation. All in all, the future of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force looks very positive.

As a modern police force gradually emerges from the ashes of the tension, the period from 1998-2003 that saw the nation plummet into lawlessness, the need for a modern Police Act which can properly facilitate the running of such a force has only been underlined.

The country's current Police Act, the legislation that governs the powers, duties and responsibilities of Solomon Islands police officers, has not been updated for some 40 years.

"The current Police Act was written and adopted as law in 1972, six years before our nation gained full independence from the British," explains the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force's Deputy Commissioner, Edmund Sikua.

"And most of the Act was written in 1954. It reflects the values and ideas of those times. Since then, our community has changed significantly, and we—both as a nation and a police force—have faced many challenges."

The existing Act is clearly a product of a by-gone era providing for a very different mode of management and administration which these days just seems inefficient and archaic.

It has been a long-held goal of RSIPF executive to review this Act to bring it in line with the demands of governing a modern police force. And so the RSIPF and Ministries of Police and Justice with support from RAMSI, have now begun the process of reviewing and drafting the revised Police Act.

Consultations in Honiara and the provinces have begun where the community, officials and the police themselves will have the chance to put forward their views on the roles, responsibilities and powers of the police force, and how to strengthen and support links and partnerships between the police and the community. It is an extensive process, but one that is of critical importance to the nation, according to the deputy commissioner.

"One of the most important aspects of the review process is the opportunity it provides for us to be exposed to the views of a wide range of our people," says Sikua.

"The review team is going to every province talking to church, women, youth and traditional leaders, seeking their views on how best to build the partnership between the police and the community."

Both the RSIPF executives and the Ministry of Police see this consultation process as key to producing an Act that is relevant and effective to Solomon Islands today.

"The revised act will provide RSIPF with greater flexibility in managing its own resources, allowing it to better meet the challenges of running a modern police force," says Sikua.

"It will reflect up-to-date policing practices, meet international standards and reflect Solomon Islands today, not the Solomon Islands of the past.

"A revised Act will give RSIPF a strong and uniquely Solomon Islands legal foundation for transforming itself into a modern, effective and accountable police force." **B**