



# Hard, fast, smart improved police of the Solomons



When the election of a new prime minister in the Solomon Islands triggered a near riot in Honiara last month, it quickly became apparent that the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) has learnt a thing or two since the Chinatown riots of April 2006. Here, Solomon Islands journalist **KOROI HAWKINS** gives his first-hand account of how the police force responded to the incident.

**W**ith my mobile pressed to one ear, stones flying overhead, car windows shattering, a stone-throwing crowd at my back and a thin line of local police officers determinedly coming towards me in the middle of this melee, all I could think of was: I am certainly in the right place at the right time. But having witnessed the mayhem and destruction of the riots that led to the razing of Chinatown in 2006, I also knew just how dangerous this could be.

To this day, the sound of a stone hitting a riot shield still triggers a visceral reaction in me, opening up a whole archive of sounds in my mind: stones hitting metal; stones pinging onto a tarmac; car windows shattering; the roar of flames as they devour buildings and finally, the altogether different hard dull thud as stone meets with flesh and bone.

It's an archive unconsciously built up from reporting on public disturbances that have taken place in Honiara before and since the infamous April 2006 riots. Normally, I would associate these sounds with feelings of despair and hopelessness, but on Wednesday November 16 last year as I stood once again in the midst of a sea of angry youths, supposedly unhappy with the newly elected Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo, the feeling was altogether different.

Dodging stones whizzing past my head as I tried to explain what was happening in a calm clear voice live to air to those listening across Radio Australia's Asia-Pacific region, my eyes were fixed on a small unit of about 20 Solomon Islands police officers, protected only by their riot gear, as they marched inexorably into a hailstorm of stones, bricks and other missiles being hurled by more than 500 angry youths bent on wreaking havoc in Honiara, the only emotion I felt was awe.

I was aware that after the debacle of the 2006 riot, RAMSI's Participating Police Force (PPF) and the RSIPF had been pouring resources into developing a specialist police response team but this was the first time I had seen them in action.

In 2006, I witnessed a cowering police force who, untrained and ill-equipped, more often than not had no choice but to run for their lives. But the hours of sweat and blood put into training, along with proper resourcing and equipping of these officers, has transformed them into a different breed of officers capable of a measured and coordinated response.

The initial disturbance started only minutes after the announcement of the election of GDL—as the new Prime Minister is known, not necessarily affectionately. From the steps of Parliament, you could see the small crowd of about a hundred people milling about in the center of town, just below us. But while the politicians were still congratulating each other, the crowd had grown quickly to more than 500.

When RSIPF's Police Response Team (PRT) appeared a short time later, fanning out to take possession of the road and looking almost like modern-day gladiators in their protective riot gear, shields and helmets shining in the scorching mid-day sun, I was concerned, thinking such a show of force might antagonise the crowd.

And sure enough, just as they were about to pass me, someone in the crowd yelled out something that sounded like "RAMSI go home!"—a comment the commander of this fully localised unit clearly did not like.

Yelling 'halt', the line of officers obeying instantly, the commander walked towards a group of bystanders pointing his baton at a young man in a black shirt and cap.

The commanding officer pulled the young man towards his unit, where as one they lifted their visors, revealing them all to be local officers.

One huge one intoning on behalf of all of them: "mi luk olsem RAMSI lo iu?" When finally they let the shaken individual go, the commanding officer was clapping the officers on, grinning all the while, as they strode towards the gathering crowd.

As the day grew hotter and the crowd swelled to include those with nothing better to do, police decided to let the large orderly crowd pass through enroute to the Governor-General's residence where they were to demand that the Prime Minister step down.

It was upon their return to town, hot and thirsty, intent on heading to Chinatown, that the showdown finally occurred and the PRT had the chance to show just how hard, fast and smart they could police their own people, and in doing so, avert a repetition of the events of 2006.

In the end it was a lone driver with about ten PRT on foot patrol who managed to drive back the crowd and prevent them entering Chinatown, eventually forcing them up into the hills above the town's main football stadium where they made one last stand, raining rocks of fury down on the police lines below.

It was at this point, RAMSI PPF officers supporting the PRT were deployed to fire around four canisters of CS gas just enough to convince even the most zealous of the rioters to pack it in and call it a day.

The skill, professionalism, coordination and courage which the local officers displayed that day, ignited within me a spark of confidence in the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force and a glimmer of hope for the future of national security in my country Solomon Islands when RAMSI finally leaves our shores.

On behalf of all Solomon Islanders, I would like to thank the RSIPF Police Response Team for their courage and bravery in the face of life threatening adversity. They are truly a pride to the force and their nation. **B**