



## RAMSI UPDATE

# BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN PEOPLE AND POLICE

Across the Solomon Islands, communities are learning how to work in partnership with the country's police through a new scheme that encourages them to nominate a 'community officer' as their bridge to the police. **TOM PERRY** reports

After three weeks of intensive training, Solomon Islands first community officers—23 people from some of the most remotest parts of the nation—have returned to their respective communities with a new sense of purpose and responsibility.

The appointment of these community officers represents an important new development in the strengthening of law and order throughout the remoter parts of Solomon Islands.

Nominated by their communities, these officers are being trained and supported by the RSIPF (Royal Solomon Islands Police Force), with assistance from RAMSI's Participating Police Force, to help communities take greater responsibility for resolving many of the day-to-day issues they face in ordinary village life.

Each community officer holds certain responsibilities as leaders in their communities; including mediation in small offences—such as minor assaults, alcohol-related offences and non-violent domestic disputes—that can be resolved at the village level, using traditional resolution methods.

Each officer has their own uniform, and is also tasked with the collection of information related to any more serious crimes or issues that cannot be resolved amongst the community, which will then be referred to the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force.

The programme has been supported by the RSIPF. Police Commissioner Peter Marshall says one of the keys to the community officer project's success is that it is the community themselves that appoint their community officer.

"Each community officer has been selected by their respective communities, based on their leadership qualities and standing in the community," explains Mr Marshall.

"From the RSIPF's point of view, community officers are incredibly important because they will help provide a whole new set of eyes and ears across the country."

RSIPF Acting Deputy Commissioner, Edmond Sikua believes that Solomon Islanders will embrace the community officer concept because it closely resembles the area constables, who were highly effective in maintaining law and order in provincial areas during the colonial period and for nearly 20 years after independence.

The approach has remained in places such as Rennell and Bellona province for many years.

"Area constables, who were appointed by the provinces, provided an effective way to bridge the formal justice system with informal systems such as chiefs, churches, women's groups, youth groups and sports organisations," Mr Sikua



explained.

"While today's circumstances are different, community officers, like area constables before them, help individual communities take greater responsibility for their law and order."

The community officer programme has been strongly supported by RAMSI's Participating Police Force which is funding it. Initial trials have been run during the past year in a number of communities, including Vella LaVella (Western Province), Malu'u (Malaita) and AvuAvu and Kohimarama (Guadalcanal), with the programme now being formally rolled out across all nine provinces.

Leading the charge has been RAMSI Participating Police Force (PPF) Officer Emmart Tsimes of Bougainville, who was responsible for the 350-strong community officer programme in Solomon Islands' close neighbour of Bougainville. Mr Tsimes says the similarities between Solomon Islands and Bougainvillean cultures have helped with the development of the programme in Solomon Islands.

"The Community Auxiliary Officer programme started in 1999 in Bougainville, and now has 350 sworn officers appointed across the region," he explained.

"The programme has been successful because it has been well-funded; the community has embraced it, as has the Bougainville Police Service. Culturally, Solomon Islanders share so much with Bougainvilleans and we are taking a very similar approach to implementing it

here."

And for many of the newly appointed officers themselves, they see their new roles as being important to reducing community-level crime.

Francis Ziru, a father of three from Vella Lavella, Western Province, whose community of Vella is approximately three to four hours by boat from the nearest police station, believes that a central part of the community officers' role is to increase respect amongst the people in a community.

"One of the big responsibilities of a community officer is to monitor the situation in their community, handle disputes between parties and provide education to people," he explained.

He says the recent training he and fellow officers undertook provided him with a number of things that will be essential to his community officer role.

"We have all learned from each other's experiences and how to better mediate. This is important because my role is not exactly to arrest people, but to encourage people," he explained.

"If I can provide awareness to our community on how to deal with issues and to help people share each other's views, then I can reduce the number of issues we have as a community."

The community officer programme is expected to expand significantly over the coming months. With the initial group of 23 now commencing work across the country, a new group of officers is expected to be appointed in early 2011. **IB**