

# PNG: On the road to

## nowhere or somewhere

Mark Forbes

Lush glimpses of life flash through the wire-mesh windows of Highlands Highway patrol vehicle number 01. Metre-high, red powder nut cobs are stacked for sale and large, freshly caught trout are staked by the roadside. Women sell betelnut under multi-coloured umbrellas and a constant stream of locals walk their produce along this artery of the isolated, resource-rich Highlands provinces of Papua New Guinea.

The road from Lae up through the highlands is the lifeline of the nation, the only route to PNG's rich inland gold mines, oil fields and coffee plantations. But to the Royal PNG constabulary highway patrol, this bone-shaking, teeth-jarring journey is marked by ambush spots, murder sites, tribal battles and abandoned, Australian-funded, police posts. From the Highlands capital of Mount Hagen—still shocked by the recent, brutal, Sunday morning slaying of an Australian pilot—to the 'wild west' town of Mendi, a journey on the highway reflects the extent of the crime wave and general social crisis facing PNG. Many areas are reverting to violent tribalism. Self-styled warlords are heavily armed and rampant corruption diverts practically all funding from essential services such as education and medical care.

Later this year, plans call for more than 40 armed Australian police to assist with patrolling this lawless country as part of a 230-strong contingent of police funded by a \$1.2 billion Australian initiative. The five-year Enhanced Co-operation Program will supplement \$1.3 billion in existing Australian aid. Alongside the Solomon Islands intervention, the move to restore order and save PNG from probable collapse is Australia's most significant regional initiative.

The Australian assistance mission will face a volatile mix of greed and guns in trouble spots such as Port Moresby, Mount Hagen and Lae. They will be working in a young nation in an old land, where sorcerers are as feared as the criminals who rob and rape. The first task of the Australian police will be to revitalise a local police force that PNG Police Minister, Bire Kimisopa, concedes is dysfunctional and corrupt.

My highway patrol guide, Moses Makob, was a typical young, but embittered, constable. 'We are all sinners,' he said as the decrepit troop carrier thumped along the crumbling highway. 'The commanders, too, are corrupt; corruption starts from the top down.' Corruption helps support families trying to survive on the \$8 a day Makob and his fellow constables are paid. 'There wouldn't be corruption, law and order problems if the Government looked after the wealth of the policemen', Makob claimed.

The only reason the police could go out on patrol the day I accompanied them was because I paid for the petrol. But local criminals, such as the three men wielding bush knives who, earlier that day had stopped a crowded ute and raped a young woman, know there is little chance of being apprehended.

Parts of the highlands highway have deteriorated so badly that Shell has halted deliveries, thereby causing a fuel crisis. Mount Hagen trucking operator Andrew Rice warned his rigs are secure when moving but 'as soon as the truck stops they are all over you; you are a sitting duck'.

In Mendi, Southern Highlands police commander, Simon Nigi, admitted police have lost control of much of this vital region, with most posts having been abandoned during the widespread violence surrounding the 2002 elections. Arms smuggling connected to tribal power struggles and a booming marijuana trade have left his men heavily outgunned—they now face between 1000 and 3000 military weapons. Traditional tribal fights, once confined to bows and arrows, now wreak deadly havoc. 'We are heading for disaster' warned Nigi, the man handpicked to return a semblance of order to the province. About 400 rapists and murderers are still at large and they cannot be brought to justice because of 'logistics', he advised.

Standing in Mendi's leaking, thrice-condemned, fibro police barracks, Nigi maintained police wages and living standards must be boosted. His police vehicles are rationed to less than two litres of petrol a day. He advocates a Solomon Islands-style paramilitary

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knives who, earlier that day had stopped a crowded ute and raped a young

operation, backed by Australian soldiers, to sweep guns out of the region. 'I am keeping my fingers crossed and hoping the quicker the Australian program comes the better. We alone cannot fight this losing battle.' But the first aim of the package must be 'to do something about this sickness called corruption'.

Robert Posu, chairman of the local landowner council, fears the town is facing ruin. 'People become frustrated because there are no books in the classroom, no medicine in the hospitals; people are dying of curable diseases.' Mistrust of the police and courts has seen villages create their own militias armed with powerful guns. 'If it goes on like this, the people in the village might take over town, close it down, say go back to the old ways', Posu notes. 'We are the richest province in PNG. How can there be holes in the road? Where is the Government, where is the medicine, where are the books? It's coming to boiling point.'

Several villages in the area supported the guerilla campaign of self-proclaimed regional freedom fighter David Adini, who was slain in a roadside ambush by a police mobile squad in April. Nigi related his unsuccessful attempt to negotiate a surrender. The heavily armed Adini vowed to shoot any police who came after him, saying 'These guns of yours are just toys'. Adini told Nigi he was protesting against the lack of regional development, saying, 'I have no choice; by doing this the Government will see I mean business'.

A recent Price Waterhouse audit of the Southern Highlands provincial government revealed that senior officials, including national parliament MPs, were complicit in an 'astounding and sinister' diversion of public funds. Almost all of the province's \$A15 million revenue has disappeared.

The audit found that nearly \$A2 million went to a Queensland-based company linked to the provincial governor, ostensibly for work on hospitals, that was never carried out. It also criticised the local bank manager of an Australian bank for improperly clearing a cheque the recipient said was a pay-off for ballot-box rigging.

This kind of widespread fraud explains the lack of regional services, according to the minister responsible for local government, Sir Peter Barter, who stated the situation must change to avoid 'total anarchy'. Police Minister Kimisopa supported this by noting that the failure to charge those implicated 'is another classic case of the lack of capacity of the police force'.

An even bigger scandal is the looting of the country's superannuation nest egg, the National Provident Fund. Lawyer Jimmy Maladina, brother of the then deputy Prime Minister, is facing minor charges as a result. One of the lead investigators, however, believes he has been hobbled by political interference, with investigators reassigned to remote posts to halt their inquiries.

Police Minister Kimisopa wants the Australian police

to urgently assist because the case places 'a cloud of suspicion over the head of the police'. He believes Australia's Enhanced Co-operation Program could provide a much-needed solution to PNG's crisis. It could help restore law and order by repairing the malfunctioning court and prosecution system from 'the ground up'. At present, tribal traditions of compensation and escalating payback killings have taken over from the police, Kimisopa says.

In Minj, just two hours down the Highlands highway from Mount Hagen, police have been central players in the overthrow of law and order. In March, led by their station commander, they broke into the offices of both the Public Solicitor and of a law firm, and beat clients after an unfavourable court decision.

A court in Mount Hagen had released 19 men arrested by police after hearing details of a police raid on their village in support of rival tribal warriors. The Public Solicitor, Bosip Aipe, had questioned the conduct of police in a letter to their commanders. 'The police were assisted by rival tribes who posed a real danger to the people whose villages you were raiding', his letter stated. 'There were eyewitnesses saying that they saw those rivals in police uniforms and armed to kill. We do not question the police action, but why were rival tribe members burning and stealing with your support?'

In the Highlands' lush coffee plantations, opportunists have armed rival tribal groups and taken control of some of the most lucrative estates. One of the expatriate pioneers of the industry, Dick Hagen, told me he had been run off his estate after being kidnapped at gunpoint. Instead of the police arresting the culprits, Hagen found himself put on a bogus charge of attempted murder and believes local police simply run protection rackets for those prepared to pay. Only traditional tribal resolution of problems was preventing total anarchy. 'We are getting into warlord stakes, with this undercurrent of greed and political power', Hagen maintained.

Attacking such problems is hampered by the political institutionalisation of corruption, Kimisopa says. A combination of endemic political instability, a fragile economy dependent on commodity prices, massive unemployment and a lack of police capacity 'is leading to a total breakdown in law and order'.

Even the highest post in the land, the Governor Generalship, was widely perceived to be for sale to the highest bidder. The position is elected by MPs, but the vote was strung out for months due to legal challenges and administrative errors. One of the main contenders abandoned his bid in disgust after MPs from a leading political party extorted bribes in return for their support.

Corruption also fuels much of PNG's endemic political instability. Since independence no government has served a full term, with every leader falling victim

to a no-confidence vote when opportunistic MPs cross the floor for personal gain or advancement. Large bribes are offered to tempt supporters away from the serving Prime Minister.

Despite Ausaid claims that the billions in aid pumped into PNG by Australia since independence in 1975 have been productive, infant mortality has increased to 79 deaths per 1000 births. The economy is fragile, with most major revenue-generating mining projects to be exhausted by the end of the decade and precious few new projects on line. A limited economic recovery in recent years has been largely dependent on booming commodity prices—a bubble economists predict is certain to burst.

Some of PNG's most senior leaders appear to have quietly abandoned hope, secretly moving funds offshore and seeking Australian residency.

However, a diplomatic argument ostensibly over Australian preferences for blanket police immunity appears to have been resolved by a face-saving compromise and Police Minister Kimisopa is hopeful the ECP can begin without much further delay. Both jurisdictions will be recognised, but putting any Australian assistance personnel before PNG courts will require Australian agreement.

One senior Australian official bluntly advised that while Australian police would take casualties, the cost of inaction would be greater. But, he said, five years and \$1.2 billion will be 'nowhere near enough' to prevent a nation of five million people on Queensland's doorstep from becoming a base for crime, people smuggling and the emerging security threats of the 21st century.

John Davidson, the head of Ausaid in PNG, also believes the package is essential although the nation will not be turned around in his lifetime. 'A baby dies every nine minutes in PNG, 10 women die in childbirth each day; we have to make this work'.

As difficult as policing the Highlands will be, the key test of PNG political will for reform is the plans to place Australian officials in financial management positions in the major departments to staunch the illegal diversions of funds. 'The machinery of government is broken here', advised Davidson. 'This will take a long-term engagement'.

In Port Moresby residents are weary of constant, vicious crime. The violent crime rate is 10 times that of Australia. In April a leading Australian lawyer was bashed senseless by three thugs in a popular Moresby nightspot. The thugs are believed to have been hired by a rival firm following a court loss. Another expatriate was dragged from his family car by 'raskols' (criminals), surviving only because the homemade pistol put to his temple misfired three times.

Former PNG Defence Force chief, Major General Jerry Singirok believes the widespread presence of illegal weapons had brought PNG 'to the brink of breakdown ... What is required is decisive political will to address this issue. Failing that this country will end up in complete chaos and anarchy.'

One raskol leader, 'Bita', escaped from jail in April despite being shot and wounded in his left foot by police after an armed bank robbery. He is typical of the violent criminals who blithely ride roughshod over the rule of law and is even dismissive of those who commit small scale, petty crimes. 'We go for the big money—bank robbery, business houses', he claimed. His loose network of 10 gangs appears to have easy access to pistols, shotguns, M-16 rifles, even a machine gun, and claims to work in concert with corrupt police.

His claims were an interesting mix of boasting and social analysis. Waving a snub-nosed 38 special revolver he declared 'I shoot people, I kill them. When they get aggressive and try and fight back, I shoot them ... Government needs to come down to the ground, when you talk in the air it blows away'. Bita claims the nation's leaders are 'the great raskols; our leaders steal millions'. He believes providing jobs or the dole would halt crime in Moresby. 'We want a job so we can eat bread in the morning and have our dinner at night, that's the truth. Australian police, they can come, but still crime will continue. When we rob we don't care who you are, we take it. We are not scared. They come here to stop crime. How can they feed these guys, these youths on the streets?'

The Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission in Solomon Islands had to confront a failed state and the problems of widespread governmental collapse. Once on the ground the extent of the collapse was also found to be much greater than previously believed. But the administration and local population who lined the streets when Howard visited last August—bearing signs such as 'thank you uncle Howard' and 'thank you Australian and New Zealand taxpayers'—embraced the intervention which delivered respite from thugs and criminals. Furthermore, although police-led, the mission had the deterrent factor of 1700 military personnel.

While not yet a failed state, a failing PNG presents a much larger and more complex problem. Any assistance mission in PNG faces significantly greater problems in scale, geographical area, longevity of corruption and deterioration in social fabric—all of which have contributed to spiralling, random and commonplace violence. PNG's political class may also not be as receptive and cooperative as their Solomons counterparts have been, not least because they appear unwilling to confront their collective failure since independence and their complicity in entrenched corruption.

Four questions naturally arise. Do our police forces actually have the numbers and resources to handle the situation in PNG? If (when) they eventually require defence force assistance do we actually have enough troops for what might be needed? Have we calculated the long-term financial and political costs? Do we have any real alternative? ♦

*Mark Forbes is the foreign affairs and defence correspondent for 'The Age'. He travelled through PNG in April and May 2004.*