

CHAPTER 5

DEFENCE FORCES IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

The South Pacific is the most stable region in the world. The area is free of super-power rivalry and faces no significant external threats either at present or in the foreseeable future. However, there are a number of strategic concerns that face the Pacific island states, and these concerns are reflected in the force structure of these island states.

Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea is the only country in the South Pacific which shares a common border with another country.

In April 1974 the Papua New Guinea Minister for Defence made a statement in the House of Assembly on planning and preparations to take over defence functions from the Australian Government on independence. He outlined the three broad responsibilities of the Papua New Guinea Force after independence:

- . to be able to defend the nation against external attack;
- . to be able to assist the police in the maintenance of public order and security if the police could not reasonably be expected to handle a particular situation, and
- . to contribute as required to economic development and the promotion of national administration and unity.¹

In a joint statement issued in Port Moresby on 11 February 1977 the Prime Ministers of Papua New Guinea and Australia the Rt. Hon. Michael Somare, MP, and the Rt. Hon. Malcolm Fraser, CH, MP, affirmed that the two Governments attached high importance to continuing the close co-operation between their two countries in defence matters. They acknowledged their Governments' desire to contribute to the strengthening of peace and stability in their common region. They declared that it was their Governments' intention to consult, at the request of either, about matters affecting their common security interests and about other aspects of their defence relationship (see Appendix 4).

Papua New Guinea maintains the largest defence force in the South Pacific with a strength of 3250 personnel. It is the only country in the region that has the three elements of a defence force - army, navy and air force. The largest element of the forces is the army, comprising two infantry battalions, an engineering battalion, a signal squadron and a support unit. The only heavy weapons in its inventory are 81mm field mortars. The air force possesses six DC3's and three Nomad aircraft, all of which were supplied under the Defence Co-operation Program. The maritime element of the Papua New Guinea forces has also been entirely sourced from the Defence Co-operation Program, with five ex-RAN Attack class patrol boats and two ex-RAN heavy landing craft.

A small number of Papua New Guinea defence personnel attend courses in New Zealand and New Zealand instructors are attached to the Papua New Guinea Defence Academy at Lae. The United States also has a small assistance program with Papua New Guinea with a budget of \$US20 000 in 1984 in the area of technical training and coastal surveillance courses. At present training only takes place in Papua New Guinea.

Fiji

The Royal Fiji Military Forces (2600 personnel) consist of three infantry battalions, an engineers company and three ex-USN mine sweepers, now used for fishery patrol. Other than the mine sweepers, the forces have no major pieces of equipment.

Fiji is the largest recipient of defence assistance from New Zealand. There is a substantial on-the-job training program in New Zealand. There are also a large number of New Zealand training teams in Fiji. The New Zealand armed forces regularly undertake training exercises in Fiji and are involved in reconstruction and rural development projects. The United States Government in 1983 provided \$55 000 for military education and training for Fiji. The assistance was intended to assist the Fijian forces in developing the skills needed to expand their own defence capability, especially in maintaining their role in the international peace-keeping forces in the Lebanon and the Sinai.

New Caledonia

France's military operations in the South Pacific are co-ordinated from New Caledonia. New Caledonia has no local military force of any significance, however at any one time about 2500 French troops are stationed in New Caledonia and facilities exist to provide for a considerably larger force.

Vanuatu

Vanuatu does not maintain military forces. However, there is a small mobile force of 300 personnel, which is developing a very limited defence capability. This force is responsible to the Commissioner of Police. The force consists of two rifle companies and a patrol vessel.

Tonga

Tonga maintains a small defence service (250 personnel) and has two patrol vessels and a landing craft. The defence service was established by New Zealand officers in 1954, and still receives considerable assistance from New Zealand mainly in the area of coastal navigation and seamanship courses. New Zealand forces also assist in reconstruction works after natural disasters, such as occurred when Hurricane Isaac struck Tonga in 1983. Tonga also receives modest training assistance from the United States. In 1984, \$30 000 was provided.

Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands maintains a small police force of approximately 500 personnel and it is intended to upgrade their military skills in the near future. In 1985 the United States will commence a small training program worth \$30 000 to assist in this program.

Other South Pacific Countries

New Zealand provides military assistance to the Cook Islands (reef blasting) and Niue (rock blasting), countries with which Australia does not maintain a Defence Co-operation Program.

No other state in the South Pacific has any military capabilities beyond a local constabulary. It is clear that all the countries of the South Pacific are heavily dependent on Australia and New Zealand for equipping and maintaining their defence forces. Fiji, for example, was only able to contribute to the peace-keeping force in the Lebanon after Australia supplied transport, ammunition and equipment to the Fijian defence forces. The level of defence capability of the states in

the region is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Nor is there likely to be pressure from the South Pacific states themselves to alter the type and direction of assistance that is provided under the Defence Co-operation Program.

ENDNOTE

1. Defence Report, 1974, p. 6.