

THE PNGDF IN TROUBLED TIMES*

The Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) has been through difficult times in recent years. A gradual deterioration in standards of equipment, training and discipline, and its failure to contain the rebellion on Bougainville which began in 1988, have severely lowered morale. The national government's decision in 1996-97 to employ foreign mercenaries in a covert operation against the rebel leadership on Bougainville resulted in a 'quasi-coup', in which the PNGDF commander, Brigadier General Jerry Singirok, intervened to terminate the contract with Sandline International and call for the resignation of the prime minister and two of his colleagues. The 'Sandline Affair' briefly pushed the Defence Force into the centre stage of Papua New Guinea politics, but Singirok was sacked and currently faces a charge of sedition. The affair has left a legacy of division and mistrust within the Force.

The reappointment of General Singirok in late 1998, under a new government, in the context of substantial improvement in the prospects for peace on Bougainville, has raised hopes in some quarters that the PNGDF is about to address the problems of discipline, capability and conditions, and restore its tarnished image as a professional force. But the events of 1997 have left deep scars within the Force and there are concerns that, having been increasingly politicised since the 1980s, the PNGDF may not have completely withdrawn to the barracks.

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The PNGDF – a colonial legacy

On the eve of independence in 1975, there was a serious debate amongst Papua New Guinea's emerging nationalist elite about whether the independent state should have a defence force. Not only was there no obvious external threat, but it was recognised that if there were, a Papua New Guinea Defence Force could do little more than provide token defence until support arrived from Papua New Guinea's allies.

It was acknowledged that a defence force might have a role to play in supporting civilian authorities in the maintenance of internal security, but there was some apprehension that in a divided, fragile new state a disciplined, cohesive armed force might itself pose a threat to a democratic government (as armies had done in much of post-colonial Africa and Asia).

In the event, a Papua New Guinea Defence Force, established and built up during the Australian colonial period, was retained. The Force was substantially localised but received significant support from Australia, which saw a direct self-interest in maintaining Papua New Guinea's defence capability.

External defence and internal security

In terms of its external role, the PNGDF's principal task has been patrolling the country's western border, in association with the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary (RPNGC, the police), primarily to prevent infiltration by the separatist *Organisasi Papua Merdeka* (OPM, Free Papua Movement) operating in the neighbouring Indonesian province of Irian Jaya, but also to check on cross-border movement more generally. Apart from this, the Force's small maritime element has the ambitious task of policing the country's EEZ (in which illegal fishing has not been uncommon). A brief but much celebrated external venture in 1980 also saw the PNGDF play a decisive role in bringing to an end a separatist uprising on the island of Santo in neighbouring, newly-independent Vanuatu.

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From an early stage, however, it has been clear that the PNGDF's major role was in relation to internal security.

As early as 1977 there were calls for the deployment of the PNGDF to assist police in dealing with 'tribal fighting' and criminal activity in the highlands, but there was resistance to this both from within and from outside the PNGDF. There were further demands, from national politicians and others, to use the PNGDF to quell tribal fighting in the highlands in the following years, but it was not until 1984 that the army was called out to assist police. This followed the declaration of a state of emergency, in response to rising urban crime and violence in the national capital, Port Moresby. The operation lasted for about four months, and was generally seen as a success. Two months later the PNGDF was called out again, for an operation in the National Capital District that lasted five months.

Soldiers were involved in several more operations to assist police in law and order operations in various parts of the country in 1987-88 – including a major operation in the highlands and north coast provinces, which attracted a good deal of negative publicity; police and soldiers were accused of using excessive, and sometimes arbitrary, force.

In 1989 the PNGDF was called out to assist the police on Bougainville, where a dispute by local landowners around the province's large gold and copper mine was about to grow into a rebellion.

Notwithstanding the growing role – and apparent acceptance – of the PNGDF's role in internal security operations during the 1980s, there was a reluctance to acknowledge it officially. In 1989 a Defence General Board of Inquiry (appointed to investigate a riot by PNGDF personnel) referred to the deployment of the PNGDF in this capacity as 'premature'; the same year the defence minister stated that internal security was the responsibility of the RPNGC. This changed, however, the following year.

Facing an escalating law and order problem across the country, and with the situation on Bougainville deteriorating, the

national government set up a Security Review Task Force and subsequently a National Summit on Crime. Out of these came a report which suggested that 'the most serious, foreseeable threats facing Papua New Guinea are internal' and that the priorities of the PNGDF 'should be reviewed and, as may be appropriate, re-ordered'. The proposed change of priorities was endorsed by the Defence minister, who in 1991 told a PNGDF passing out parade that 'The real future of our Defence Force is to assist the civil authorities deal effectively with these threats'. Contemporaneously, following a review of the Australian government's security assistance to Papua New Guinea, the two governments announced that Papua New Guinea was to give highest priority to internal security needs, and that Australian assistance would be geared to this.

By this time the PNGDF had become heavily committed to the conflict on Bougainville, where the combined efforts of the PNGDF and RPNGC were proving incapable of containing the activities of the rebel Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). (Indeed, as a result of some undisciplined behaviour, the security forces probably contributed to the spread of the rebellion beyond the vicinity of the mine.)

Military-civil relations

Already before 1988 there had been several isolated instances of indiscipline and defiance of government by PNGDF personnel. Conditions generated by the Bougainville conflict increased tensions between Defence Force personnel and politicians.

For one thing, as successive national governments shifted between negotiated political settlement and military action, PNGDF personnel felt (as soldiers often do in protracted guerilla war situations) that the government lacked commitment to fighting the rebels, and that 'political interference' in the conflict was a betrayal of its soldiers. Moreover, as peace negotiations between the national government and the rebels gained some ground,

PNGDF (and RPNGC) personnel were deeply suspicious of those who came across from the rebel side to help create a Bougainville Transitional Government (BTG). (The first premier of the BTG, lawyer Theodore Miriung, was murdered by a group of assailants who included military personnel.)

Second, there had been a steady deterioration in PNGDF conditions, equipment, training, and discipline for a number of years, and the Bougainville conflict put new pressures on the Force without a corresponding increase in funding. From 1987 Defence spending regularly exceeded its budget allocation (in 1991 by a massive 81 per cent). Despite this, not only were soldiers frequently not paid allowances but troops on the ground were often not adequately provisioned, and aircraft and boats were regularly out of commission because funds were not available for fuel or repairs. A Defence White Paper, finally tabled in 1996, proposed some major restructuring and generated expectations of improvements, at least in equipment and training. [Few of the recommendations of the 1996 White Paper had been implemented by 1997, when events were overtaken by the 'Sandline Affair' and a subsequent change of government. A new White Paper was presented in 1999.] Morale has been understandably low.

The blatant politicisation of the position of the commander, from the early 1980s, and the build-up of a large number of senior colonels has also contributed to growing factionalism and rivalry at the senior officer level.

The Sandline Affair

In mid 1996, frustrated at the lack of progress in negotiations with the Bougainville rebel leadership, Prime Minister Chan authorised an operation ('High Speed II') against the BRA in southern Bougainville. The operation resulted in a defeat for the security forces, and several PNGDF personnel were taken hostage by the BRA. Angered by this (and facing a national election in June

1997), the Chan government became involved in negotiations which culminated in the signing of a contract with 'military consultants' Sandline International for a covert operation against BRA leaders. The contract was subsequently exposed, and widely criticised, both within Papua New Guinea and beyond [the Sandline Affair has been discussed in detail in Dinnen, May and Regan (1997), Dorney (1998) and O'Callaghan (1999)].

In March 1997, less than four weeks after the exposure of the Sandline deal, the PNGDF commander, Brigadier General Singirok, delivered an address to the nation, in which he denounced the contract, saying that he had cancelled all further activities involving the PNGDF and Sandline (the Sandline personnel had in fact been detained and were deported soon after), and called on the prime minister, deputy prime minister, and defence minister to resign. There has been some speculation about Singirok's motives in this. The commander had been a party to the negotiations with Sandline International from an early stage, and had apparently initially accepted their proposed action on Bougainville. By mid March he clearly had second thoughts about the impact of such an operation in Bougainville, and its wider political repercussions. Several commentators have suggested, however, that a more significant factor was Singirok's resentment at Sandline's effectively taking charge of the operation.

Prime Minister Chan accused Singirok of 'gross insubordination bordering on treason', and dismissed him. He subsequently appointed as commander a controversial officer, Leo Nuia, who had attracted a degree of notoriety while commander on Bougainville and had been decommissioned by General Singirok.

Singirok's actions, however, won widespread popular approval, and after some initial resistance, and with volatile crowds demonstrating outside the National Parliament, the three ministers agreed to step down pending an enquiry. The enquiry reported in May 1997; Chan declared that it had cleared him of any wrongdoing and resumed office. But in the national elections the following month both Chan and his defence minister lost their

seats. This was the first time in Papua New Guinea's political history that an incumbent prime minister had failed to gain re-election.

Another fallout from the election was the arrest of Major Walter Enuma – the officer who had led the operation to oust the Sandline personnel – and thirteen soldiers under his command. Enuma (who earlier had been seconded to the Electoral Commission to help coordinate security during the elections) had been in the highlands, where he and his troops were said to have provided support to particular candidates favoured by Singirok. The soldiers were charged with setting up an unauthorised force. Subsequently armed soldiers forced their way into a police station in Port Moresby where Enuma and others were being held, released them, and then proceeded to PNGDF HQ where they briefly placed General Nuiua under 'house arrest'.

By this time, divisions within the PNGDF, partly along regional, 'ethnic' lines, had become a serious threat to the cohesion of the Defence Force. The Special Forces Unit, which had been set up by General Singirok in 1996 following a recommendation of the 1996 Defence White Paper, and had played a prominent role in the operation against Sandline, was effectively disbanded under Nuiua, and a Special Operations Group, set up by Nuiua, was allegedly used to harass Singirok supporters within and outside the PNGDF.

The aftermath of Sandline – increased politicisation?

The incoming coalition government was headed by former National Capital District governor (and self-confessed former *raskol*) Bill Skate. Skate had been a strong supporter of Singirok in March 1997.

Towards the end of 1998, amid talk of an imminent parliamen-

¹ The term *raskol* is used in Papua New Guinea to refer to members of criminal gangs.

tary vote of no confidence against him, Skate announced that he could no longer work with General Nuia, and reappointed Singirok.

Singirok's reappointment brought mixed reactions. Apart from the fact that some elements within the PNGDF, mobilised in the wake of the Sandline Affair, were now opposed to him, Singirok still faced a charge of sedition (a charge which was quickly re-activated by police following his re-appointment). A group of former PNGDF commanders called on him to step down until the sedition charge had been settled. More significantly, the revelation, in July 1997, that prior to the Sandline Affair General Singirok had received payments from a British arms dealer, substantially undermined the moral high ground on which Singirok had stood.

Against this background, there were rumours in Port Moresby in late 1998 that Prime Minister Skate had reappointed Singirok to strengthen his hand in the event the parliamentary vote of no confidence proceeded; there was talk of a possible military coup, and expressions of concerns that the Special Forces Unit had been reconstituted and was in training outside Port Moresby. The threat of a no confidence vote was averted when in December 1998 Skate adjourned the National Parliament for six months.

Rumours of an imminent coup surface from time to time in Papua New Guinea, but in a country which is culturally and geographically fragmented, with no dominant ethnic group, a robust tradition of challenging authority, and relatively low levels of urbanisation, it is difficult to conceive of a military coup being sustained. By early 1999 fears of a coup had subsided.

On reappointment, Singirok promised 'a massive clean-up' to restore standards and improve conditions for personnel, and to refocus on the PNGDF's role in civic action and nation building. With respect to the latter, construction of a long-promised engineers base in the highlands commenced in early 1999. With progress towards peace on Bougainville (a paradoxical by-product of the Sandline Affair), it is anticipated that troops released

from there can be used to increase the PNGDF's presence on the border with Indonesia (patrols having effectively lapsed in 1988).

But the commander faces an uphill task. For a start he has to deal with problems of factionalism and rivalry within the Force. In January 1999 six senior colonels (not known for their support of Singirok during the events of 1997) were sacked, and several others promoted, though this has produced some legal challenges. A programme of reconciliation and confidence building within the Force has been initiated. Second, he has to address the task of restructuring and upgrading the Force. Commencing in 1999 some 700 PNGDF personnel (in a force of around 4200) will leave through retirement or redundancy. Without a significant injection of funds any restructuring will be difficult, and in the present budgetary climate, funds are scarce. If these two issues can be addressed, progress may be made in respect of another critical issue – that of reversing the decline in PNGDF morale.

Beyond these issues, however, is a bigger question. The role of the PNGDF in internal security is now well established, though the respective responsibilities of police and army have never been clearly defined, and, even after years of joint operation on Bougainville, antipathy between the two services persists. But in a situation in which the army, and increasingly the police, have been politicised, and in which coalition governments are continually pushing the limits of their constitutional powers to stay in office, it is not entirely clear what subservience to the civilian authorities entails. A full-scale military coup still looks highly improbable, but another 'Sandline Affair' certainly cannot be ruled out.