In the capital of Australia’s closest neighbor, PNG, there are no easy answers to the endemic violence.

Words and photographs by Dave Tacon

As the police hilux pulls out of a big rooster restaurant car park in Port Moresby last August, the three officers inside survey the area nervously. Without warning, a man at an ATM across from the driver’s side wheels around brandishing a police- and military-issue M16 assault rifle. In a burst of automatic gunfire, bullets tear into the vehicle’s bonnet, windscreen, dashboard and straight through the faded Royal Papua New Guinea Police Constabulary logo on the driver’s door, wounding the officer in the arm. One of the gunman’s accomplices then steps in from the opposite side and relieves the front seat passenger of his own M16, while another grabs the gang’s target: the restaurant’s payroll.
This phenomenon of police officers risking their lives (and police property) as private security freelancers is a tale of everyday lawlessness and corruption in the capital of Australia’s closest neighbour. The death of an officer in a similar incident in late October last year and a subsequent crackdown on moonlighting has made little difference.

Since Australia granted Papua New Guinea independence in 1975, Port Moresby has become synonymous with violent crime carried out by “raskol” gangs (the word raskol is a local pidgin derivative of “rascal”). Although much crime is driven by poverty, tribal allegiance also plays a part in the ethnically diverse capital of a nation with more than 760 distinctly different languages. Unemployment has been estimated at anything between 60 and 90 per cent (in 2004), and most of Port Moresby’s population live in the grip of poverty with low or no wages. The nation’s corrupt and ineffectual government provides no social security for its citizens and many essential items are imported and beyond their means. Sanitation is inadequate and in recent years Port Moresby has suffered its first cholera outbreaks since the 1960s.

In 2010, the city was named the world’s third least liveable city by British magazine The Economist, beating only Dhaka in Bangladesh and Harare in Zimbabwe (although the list of 130 destinations didn’t include war-torn cities such as Baghdad and Kabul). While Port Moresby has a murder rate of 14 per 100,000 citizens, far below the alleged murder capital of the world, Caracas in Venezuela (with a reported murder rate of up to 160, it is still 36 times that of Canberra and more than 10 times Australia’s national average.

In the lead-up to Christmas last year, carjackings among the city’s 300,000 or so inhabitants spiked to approximately 10 per day. Port Moresby’s close-knit expatriate community is mainly housed in fortified compounds, often with both security guards and attack dogs. The Australian High Commission, surrounded by high concrete walls and razor wire, provides arguably the city’s most secure accommodation and has been jokingly referred to by locals as “Fort Shit-Scared”.

With such precautions, major crimes against foreigners are rare. Nevertheless, in a country that promotes itself as “Land of the Unexpected”, Port Moresby residents live in varying states of paranoia buoyed by the knowledge that random acts of ultra-violence might be just around the corner. It is the native Papuans that bear the brunt of Port Moresby’s violent crime. The city’s largest police station is located in Boroko in the south-east. According to station commander, Senior Constable Mark Yangan, a normal week would consist of some 28 to 35 carjackings, about three murders and three to four rapes. Yangan admits that the last statistic is misleading, as most rapes remain unreported. Few murders are ever solved.

“In Australia police don’t carry big guns like M16s and Bushmasters, but we need them here because the criminals have them too.”

Dave Tacon is a Melbourne-based writer and photographer. This is his first story for RS.
divvy van cruises through the arid streets, past rusted and burnt-out car wrecks. Mitre cheerfully tells of their AFP counterpart’s shock when officers opened fire on carjacking suspects as they attempted to dump a vehicle after a pursuit. One of the suspects was shot dead before he could climb out of his seat. “She kept saying, ‘Why did you shoot him? You didn’t have to shoot him,’” he laughs.

Apart from the breaking up of an illegal card game in a dusty back street, this afternoon’s patrol is mostly uneventful. Mitre rides shotgun with his own Bushmaster assault rifle, while his driver, First Constable Hanao, is unarmed. “I have a rubber slingshot, which he confiscated from a youth earlier in the day. A pair of detectives that stop and share cigarettes with have to make sure the people see some benefit...”

Fear and Loathing

Markis Karau, 25, (far right) has been charged with murder and attempted murder and held for five months while awaiting trial. Karau was transferred to the notorious Bomana Prison as punishment for giving an interview to Rolling Stone. According to Elijah Ma'a (right) was illegally shot through both feet with a 9mm pistol before confessing to murder and robbery. According to an inmate, prisoners in the cell block at Koroba Police Station are often tortured in order to extract confessions...”

Resource-rich PNG must find a way to ensure the people see some benefit from the plunder of their homeland.

Papua New Guinea is resource rich, and the mining of gold, copper, oil, natural gas and other minerals accounts for more than 80 per cent of GDP. Government revenues and foreign exchange earnings depend heavily on mineral and oil exports, and indigenous landowners in areas affected by minerals projects also receive royalties from those operations. Unfortunately, past experience in PNG and other developing nations has led to grave concerns about the potential for this great untapped wealth to cause more harm than good. “While there’s potential for positive access to resources for funds for development, there’s also the potential to exacerbate conflict as we have seen in the past in Bougainville and in other countries that have a natural resource boom,” says Jock Paul, a humanitarian affairs officer with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. “We are not business-minded people. We are subsistence farmers. This is all new to us. Interoil is also building an LNG production facility which it aims to complete by 2012, and even Exxon Mobil has begun a four-year program to begin commercialising the country’s estimated 22.5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves through the construction of a massive liquefied natural gas (LNG) production facility. This will be the largest resource extraction undertaken in the country, and even Exxon Mobil is concerned about the impact. “More money will help us with education, livelihoods and housing, but it’s also bringing about jealousy, ill feelings and discomfort in the community,” a local Exxon Mobil community affairs officer told the BNMS news agency (on condition of anonymity). “We are not business-minded people. We are subsistence farmers.”

The Paradox of Plenty in PNG

PNG as it sets up a sovereign wealth fund for future generations, David Murray, chairman of Australia’s Future Fund Board of Guardians, recently told PNG’s business community. “More money will help us with education, livelihoods and housing, but it’s also bringing about jealousy, ill feelings and discomfort in the community,” a local Exxon Mobil community affairs officer told the BNMS news agency (on condition of anonymity). “We are not business-minded people. We are subsistence farmers.”

The pressure to get it right is definitely on. Unfortunately, past experience in PNG and other developing nations has led to grave concerns about the potential for this great untapped wealth to cause more harm than good.

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Markup
The police’s candour about negligence extends to a memorandum, dated October 1st, 2010, pinned for all to see on a noticeboard in the foyer of the station near its front desk. In it, Senior Inspector Yangan admonishes his chargés for their “ignorant and no-care attitude”, which is leading to the escape of prisoners from the station’s cell block. He signs off with the threat that any officers who allow food, phones or any prisoner’s property into the cells will face disciplinary action.

It does not seem to be working. Inside the 1960s-era concrete cell block, prisoners smoke marijuana, share home brew alcohol in plastic bottles and converse with their friends and family on the outside on shared mobile phones. Still, conditions are squalid and inmates sleep on cardboard scraps. According to prisoners, they are routinely beaten by prison guards, while many of the inmates are held without charge and some have been tortured into making their confessions. One inmate, Elijah Mann, was allegedly shot through both feet with a 9mm pistol before confessing to murder and robbery. Separate from the male prisoners are five women, all held in relation to murdering their husbands.

While not nearly as sensational as bank robberies, carjackings or home invasions, domestic violence is Papua New Guinea’s most common crime. Violence against women is culturally ingrained, perhaps more than anywhere else in the world. According to Papua New Guinea’s Law Reform Commission, 70 per cent of women claim to have suffered physical abuse at the hands of their husbands, while in some parts of the country, that figure can reach as high as 100 per cent.

Boroko Police Station is home to a four-person task force dedicated to violence against women. The Family Sexual Domestic Violence unit (FSDV) is led by 48-year-old Senior Sergeant Patrina Dikin, who herself left an abusive husband to raise a child on her own. This pilot project, established in August 2009, received more than 900 reports of domestic and related violence in its first four months. Sergeant Dikin admits that although domestic violence has not traditionally been viewed as a criminal matter, she remains optimistic that her unit can be a vehicle for change.

“We get around 15 to 20 complaints every day,” she says. “Our office is small and we are working with limited resources, but women are getting empowered to seek justice. Progress is slow, but it’s the start of a new chapter in law enforcement here.”

Progress might be being made, but to solve a problem as deeply ingrained as Papua New Guinea’s, it’s going to be a long road. Port Moresby’s streets are being cleaned, but there’s plenty of work left to be done.