

AFP joins cooperative effort after Tongan riots

Unprecedented civil unrest in Nuku'alofa, the capital city of Tonga, on 16 November led the Tongan Government to request law enforcement assistance from the Australian and New Zealand governments, resulting in the deployment of AFP personnel within two days of the request.

On 18 November 35 AFP personnel left Canberra followed by seven forensic and technical specialists just days after.

The National Manager for the International Deployment Group (IDG), Assistant Commissioner Paul Jevtovic, said the prompt response by Australian and New Zealand police and defence personnel provided an immediate impact on assisting the Tongan police to restore law and order as part of *Operation Tokoni* (Tongan for helping).

"We have been involved in a wide range of functions including crime scene management, forensic examinations, investigations into the deaths of seven Tongan nationals, operational planning, witness interviews, brief compilation and protection of key infrastructure.

"The AFP has a long-standing relationship with the Tongan Police Force through its members working alongside us in the Solomon Islands and participation in AFP training programs in Australia. It is important that Australian police help our law enforcement partners in the Pacific



AFP members departing Canberra on 18 November.



AFP members survey the damage in the wake of mid-November riots in Nuku'alofa.

to maintain civil order and to prevent further outbreaks of violence,"

"Most importantly, our arrival allowed a very tired Tongan Police Force (TPF) to re-group after the riots and gave them reassurance that they had support from within the region. The TPF have done a very good job in difficult

circumstances and I am fortunate as the National Manager IDG to be continually exposed to the professional and committed manner in which AFP personnel volunteer for and respond to our international policing demands and challenges," Assistant Commissioner Jevtovic said.

Contingency plan... for war

By Federal Agent Richard Stanford,

Following last edition's overview report on the evacuation of Australian citizens from war-torn Beirut, Federal Agent Richard Stanford provides a personal perspective of the evacuation.

Shortly after arriving in Beirut in January 2005 to begin my posting, a massive truck bomb destroyed former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's motorcade killing Hariri and 22 others.

There were another 14 car bombings in Lebanon during 2005, resulting in almost 50 deaths. Because the bombings had been targeted political assassinations, I rationalised that I was not in any real danger. However, this logic was discarded immediately after the outbreak of the war between Israel and Hezbollah in the early hours of 13 July 2006, when Israeli jets bombed Beirut International Airport following the capture of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah a day earlier.

Beirut is located on a small peninsular jutting into the eastern Mediterranean, with a population of approximately one million people housed mostly in apartments, it is a small city of around 20 square kilometres. As a result the one tonne bunker-buster bombs that Israel dropped each night in an attempt to destroy Hezbollah's subterranean command bunkers were heard, felt and smelt all over Beirut. The Hezbollah heartland is located only 2km from my home in West Beirut, and it came under attack each night, making



Australians awaiting evacuation in Beirut

sleep impossible, and causing a knot of fear in my belly that only subsided after the raids finished. I operated on a combination of adrenaline and nervous energy for two weeks while engaged in the evacuation of more than 5000 Australian citizens from Lebanon.

It was imperative that the evacuations began as soon as possible after the outbreak of war, mainly as a safety measure for the Australians trapped in the war zone, and to rebut criticism that not enough was being done for those caught in the fighting. At any one time there are up to 25,000 Australians in Lebanon and on the outbreak of these hostilities about 8000 registered for evacuation with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

At the beginning of the war we held a planning session in the Australian

Embassy to design a process to collect the evacuees, vet their travel documents, collate their details for the Lebanese immigration service, and convey them to Port Beirut to board ships bound for either Cyprus or Turkey.

The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), DFAT the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and AFP officers worked together in roles not usually expected of their respective agencies. Locally engaged staff from all agencies collaborated and worked brilliantly over a fortnight to ensure that the evacuations were successful.

The first two ships chartered by Australia were gazumped by other governments, forcing us to rapidly organise two bus convoys to evacuate about 200 urgent cases to the Arrida border crossing into Syria located on the coast about 35km

Australian Defence, Immigration and AFP personnel worked long hours to bring about a successful evacuation – Defence Photo



north of Tripoli. As we were loading the first bus convoy, Israeli gunboats shelled an oil fuel installation about 300 metres from our position on the coast just north of Beirut.

A couple of shells were off target and whistled over our heads, exploding in the block behind us. The shrapnel from one landed among us, which injected a greater sense of urgency into proceedings!

As we drove up the main coastal highway to Syria we were forced to wait while rescue workers pulled rubble away and cleared the highway at the smoking ruins of a Lebanese Army post north of Tripoli that had been attacked a few hours earlier by the Israelis, killing 10 Lebanese soldiers.

This was a particularly tough convoy to lead because my wife was one of the evacuees! After a sad goodbye to her at the border, I returned to Beirut in record time as the roads were becoming increasingly dangerous due to Israeli attacks. Once back in Beirut I commenced preparations for the next day's convoy to Arrida.

After leading two bus convoys to the coastal border crossing of Arrida it was clear that land evacuations were too labour intensive, so DFAT officials

in Greece and Turkey chartered large ferryboats that proved to be ideal. While waiting for the Australian chartered ships, we secured places on vessels that had been chartered by other nations.

Our attempts to load about 230 Australians onto a Greek naval landing vessel were cut short when the captain decided to leave because of a curfew imposed by the Israeli Navy. This left us with about 200 people stranded on the wharf. The captain then had a change of heart and agreed to take another 20 Australian evacuees. In what was one of the worst days of my life, I had to choose who would be lucky enough to get on board. The scene can best be described as pandemonium as people jostled to get to the gangway, many thrusting their infants upwards toward the gangway, begging for their children to be saved.

When the Greek ship sailed, about 200 Australians remained on the wharf. We loaded our tired and frustrated charges back onto the buses and took them to a nearby hotel where they were given a hot meal and somewhere to sleep. That night, my Greek counterpart in Beirut, Lieutenant Konstantinos Rizos, called to apologise for the day's events. He then asked how many places I wanted as he had another warship arriving. This was police-to-police cooperation at its best!

The next day we loaded our 200 now happy Australians and sailed for Larnaca in Cyprus. The Australian Ambassador, Lyndall Sachs, asked me to accompany the evacuees on the Greek frigate and provide reassurance, information, and pastoral care as many were from devastated areas of South Lebanon and had lost relatives and all their possessions in the war. If the previous day was one of the worst I'd experienced in the job, then this day was one of the best, with many evacuees saying they were reassured to be in the care of the Australian Federal Police.

The evacuation process evolved into an extremely efficient operation able to move more than 2000 people daily once DFAT and Australian Defence Force personnel arrived in Beirut. AFP personnel in Lebanon and Cyprus also worked very long hours, often in hazardous conditions, to make the evacuation a success.

Federal Agent Elias Farah was on study leave in north Lebanon when the war started. He was recalled to duty from the safety of the north to Beirut where he became an integral part of the evacuation. His knowledge of Lebanese maritime, immigration procedures and officials was invaluable in clearing our ships for departure before the Israeli-

imposed daily curfews came into effect. He also showed considerable initiative when he obtained 6000 litres of scarce diesel fuel to power the air conditioning unit at the Beirut Exhibition Centre that was used as our evacuation centre. In so doing, he displayed the finest Phoenician trading spirit by negotiating a 25 per cent discount on the going rate!

Another AFP member, Federal Agent Ken Ross, who was on long service leave in Beirut making plans to marry his Lebanese sweetheart, called me when hostilities began. He managed the primary marshalling point in Beirut as well as controlling the crowds, often larger than 1000, which gathered by 6.30am for evacuation. He worked in very hot and dangerous conditions, often with emotional and traumatised people who needed just the right combination of understanding and firmness, and he displayed plenty of both.

Federal Agent Ray McDonald was in Cyprus, unable to return to Lebanon when the war broke out so he joined the Emergency Response Team with Federal Agent Brendon Withers where he provided expert local knowledge. Overall, more than 75,000 people were evacuated from Lebanon to Cyprus. Federal Agent McDonald returned to Beirut after the major evacuation effort was complete and took responsibility for the Beirut Office for the last two weeks of the war, which allowed me to take some leave.

Ms Faye Eid, the AFP's investigative assistant in Beirut, assisted the evacuation by compiling ships' manifests, bussing the evacuees to the Port from the main marshalling point, and by acting as interpreter. Although she was initially in her home village in the safety of north Lebanon, Faye moved back to Beirut at my request and

remained there until the evacuations were completed.

AFP and State police attached to the United Nations Civilian Police in Cyprus provided invaluable assistance by travelling as escorts on all our ships, providing advice and reassurance. Many of their spouses volunteered to work with the emergency response team receiving the evacuees, housing them in Cyprus and organising their transport to Australia.

Although the evacuations were conducted in tragic and hazardous circumstances, I found it to be a truly rewarding experience in which all Australian agencies worked in unison to assist their fellow Australians when they most needed a helping hand.

For me the lessons learned from this exercise were many, but the most significant is that you can't have too much contingency planning, and the most unlikely eventualities must be factored into your business planning. The great surprise of this conflict was the speed with which a minor border skirmish descended into all out war – a mere 24 hours, by which time it is too late to develop plans. The best idea is to have them ready and update them regularly.

One of the last Australian Government chartered ships to take Australian nationals out of Beirut, the San Gwann, transported approximately 300 evacuees to Port Cyprus on 5 August.

