

Targeting crime in the Pacific region



The Pacific Transnational Crime Network is an initiative of the AFP and is enhancing policing in the region.

Early last September, Federal Agent Greg White's mobile phone rang as he walked up the steps into the Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre in Apia, Samoa.

At the other end of the phone that morning was Inspector Meleanie Taueli, the team leader from the Tonga Transnational Crime Unit (TCU). She had information that the most wanted man in the Pacific was about to arrive in Apia.

The man was Fijian national Salendra Sinha, a man with many aliases who was wanted by Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands for a myriad of offences.

Inspector Taueli said that Sinha was believed to be in Samoa after hiding under false identities in Tonga and, before that, in Fiji.

Sinha and an associate had been tracked to Samoa where they were expected to catch connecting flights to Sydney and Singapore. Despite the urgent international communications, it looked like Sinha had successfully made the transfer to a Polynesian Blue flight to Sydney. Federal Agent White immediately began a series of phone calls to AFP and Australian Customs personnel to meet the flight in Sydney. Between calls, he received a welcome message from the Samoa TCU. Sinha's luck had run out. He had been turned away at the Polynesian Blue check-in counter because his false passport did not have an Australian transit visa. The bad news was that he had left the airport.

After a hastily arranged search by Senior Sergeant Viliamu Viliamu and two members

of the Samoa TCU team, Sinha was found walking along the main street of Apia.

He was headed for the Australian High Commission having just left the Samoa Immigration Department where he had tried to extend his local visa. Senior Sergeant Viliamu arrested Sinha for immigration offences and a few days later he was deported to Fiji to face fraud and immigration charges.

The international cooperation that enabled the arrest of Sinha was delivered via the Pacific Transnational Crime Network, an AFP-initiated program which has helped 10 Pacific Island nations to work together with the AFP and the US Asia-Pacific counter-drug organisation, Joint Interagency Task Force West, to investigate and prevent crime.

The Pacific Transnational Crime Network (PTCN) was formed in July 2002 in response to the emergence of significant transnational crime. The AFP identified an opportunity to use the strong relationships it had established throughout the Pacific region to extend those partnerships into the creation of a Pacific-owned transnational crime law enforcement entity.

Samoa Police Commissioner Papaliitele Lorenese Neru, Chair of the Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre Board of Management, said in October 2007 that collaboration and commitment to the fight against transnational crime was the key to success.

"Having assumed the Chair and attended my first meeting, I am cognisant of the magnitude of the challenges that lie ahead of me, my Board, the PTCN and other law enforcement agencies in the fight against

transnational crime in the Pacific region," Commissioner Neru said.

"This will not be easy, but in true Pacific style, if we work collaboratively and remain committed to the fight, I am sure we will prevail."

The AFP has provided extensive training to its Pacific law enforcement partners in investigations management, surveillance and intelligence, along with the provision of senior AFP officers who have mentored the officers at the TCUs since the inception of the program. Through its Law Enforcement Cooperation Program, the AFP has provided a range of technical assistance by providing information technology infrastructure, secure communications and a range of other technical assistance.

The formation of the PTCN has significantly reduced operational costs for the AFP. For example, Operation Logrunner, an international operation that netted in Fiji 357 kilograms of heroin destined for Australia in in October 2000, cost the AFP an estimated \$2 million. Since the PTCN was formed, Pacific island police forces have increased capacity to take carriage of investigations such as this, therefore reducing the level of AFP resources required.

In June 2004, the then largest methamphetamine laboratory in the southern hemisphere was discovered and dismantled in Suva, Fiji. Capable of producing up to 500kgs of methamphetamine per week, this laboratory posed enormous environmental and physical dangers to local communities. The methamphetamine was potentially destined for markets in Europe, the US, Australia and New Zealand.



The Fiji TCU had primary carriage of the methamphetamine laboratory investigation, including surveillance operations. This proved that law enforcement agencies in smaller island countries have a potent, capable and interlinked capability to fight transnational crime.

Coordinator Asia-Pacific Desk John Tanti said communication between all TCU countries was strong and effective.

“When confronted by criminals operating across borders, they have partners in neighbouring island countries and regional partners to join with in advancing their own law enforcement response to transnational crime syndicates,” Federal Agent Tanti said.

A recent example of a successful operation involving a TCU occurred on 22 June 2009 when four search warrants were executed in Pohnpei as part of a joint Micronesia State Police and Micronesia TCU investigation relating to the cultivation and distribution of cannabis.

A total of 231 plants ranging from 40 centimetres to three metres in height were seized at four separate residences in Pohnpei. Three people were arrested.

The seizure was worth up to \$10,000 – a very large income by Micronesian standards. The seized plants could have earned as much as \$50,000 over one year.

But transnational crime in the Pacific is not just about illicit drugs.

Notorious conman Peter Foster defrauded the Bank of the Federated States of Micronesia of more than \$US500,000 and attempted to defraud landowners in Fiji to build a resort complex.

Foster was arrested in Vanuatu and served three weeks of a six-week sentence for illegally entering that country. He was then deported to Australia, arrested in Brisbane and convicted for money laundering. He was sentenced to four and a half years’ gaol in December 2007, and on 4 May 2009 was released on parole.

The PTCN includes TCUs in Fiji (Suva and Nadi), Samoa, Tonga, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and in the Federated States of Micronesia. ‘Mini-TCUs’ have also been established in Palau, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Marshall Islands and Kiribati.

The Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre (PTCCC) located in Apia, Samoa, is the core of the PTCN and manages, coordinates and enhances law enforcement intelligence provided by TCUs and regional law enforcement agencies. The current Team Leader of the PTCCC is Osea Dakai, an officer from Fiji Customs.



Cannabis plants seized in Pohnpei.

The TCUs collect, collate, analyse and disseminate tactical law enforcement intelligence to identify, target and investigate transnational crime. All TCUs are well-resourced and are small, discrete entities.

The TCUs use a database developed and implemented by the AFP for processing and managing information, and a secure communications platform to exchange information and intelligence.

All TCU staff receive training by the AFP’s Learning and Development teams in law enforcement intelligence, investigations, surveillance and operations security. The Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) West is also supporting training for TCUs, and agencies such as the Pacific Islands Forum secretariat conduct training programs.

The AFP provided the TCUs with vehicles, office equipment and furniture, and all have similar surveillance equipment. JIATF West refurbished the Micronesia TCU, and the AFP provided the training, a vehicle and an advisor.

Further TCUs are planned, including one for the Solomon Islands and an expansion of the Papua New Guinea TCU. All law enforcement agencies in the region are beneficiaries of intelligence generated by the PTCN.

French law enforcement agencies in the region have indicated a desire to actively participate within the PTCN and formal dialogue is continuing between the AFP and law enforcement authorities in France to implement this participation.

Salendra Sinha – a case study in fraud

In September 2008, the Samoa TCU arrested Salendra Sinha, a Fiji national, for immigration and financial fraud activity in Vanuatu, Fiji and the Solomon Islands.

For more than six months the Fiji TCU investigated Sinha, who had advertised an immigration scheme in 2007. He claimed that for a fee of \$FJD555 (\$A335) he could provide visas for work in Australian mining companies. From the money that was paid to him, he kept \$FJD380,000 (more than \$A229,000) and a significant number of victims' passports, and used those passports to commit further offences. He was also involved in a scheme to intercept and fraudulently alter cheques written by the Fiji Revenue and Customs Authority to the value of \$FJD200,000 (more than \$A120,000).

In September 2008, the PTCCC established that Sinha had entered Tonga on a false passport and then travelled to Samoa where he was arrested attempting to flee to Singapore. He was deported to Fiji a few days later. Fiji TCU executed warrants on Sinha's residence and found evidence that directly linked him to the immigration and cheque schemes. A number of fraudulently obtained passports were also recovered.

Sinha had previously allegedly committed similar offences, including defrauding the National Bank of Vanuatu of \$US420,000 (more than \$A533,600), and for passport offences in the Solomon Islands. Sinha had a history of absconding from bail and when he attended the Lautoka Magistrates Court in Suva, Fiji for a hearing related to the above offences he jumped over the railing of the defendant's box and escaped through the front door of the court into a waiting car. He was recaptured by the Fiji TCU a few days later, along with his lawyer and others who had planned the escape.

Sinha's criminal activities affected the revenue capacity of several Pacific island countries as well as the lives of hundreds of low-income families. His criminal activity also created the potential for himself and others to commit immigration offences against Australia with passport offences by using fraudulent passports to enter Australia.

This case demonstrates the collaborative actions of the PTCN in effectively dismantling this operation, which had the potential to continue to defraud governments and people of enormous amounts of money.

