

**REPUBLIC OF VANUATU
OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN**

PUBLIC REPORT

ON THE

**VANUATU FIRE SERVICE FAILURE TO PUT
OUT THE FIRE ON 6 MAY 1998
AT PARIS SHOPPING,
SNOOPY'S, AU PECHE MIGNON AND
FRANK KING TOURS**

12 May 1999

8553/9/07

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PREAMBLE

"Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a broken tooth and a foot out of joint".

Proverbs 25 v 19

It is a source of regret as well as shame that able-bodied men are obliged to sit around wasting time instead of being regularly drilled in their duties, and carefully ensuring their equipment is in a first class order.

That shame is doubly due when it is considered that ten months later, an equally disgraceful act was repeated when fire consumed totally the building of General Store situated on the same road.

Drastic disciplinary action and review are necessary if the public is to restore any confidence whatever in the Fire Service.

SUMMARY

This reports is about the failure of the Vanuatu Fire Service ("VFS") in putting out the fire in the capital city of Port Vila, which destroyed one building including four (4) shops, namely Paris Shopping, Snoopy's, a pastry shop, La Tentation, and Frank King Tours on 6 May 1998.

The VFS could not do anything to stop the fire. Their main problem was that they could not get enough water pressure and did not know how to increase it from the main town pipe where they were connecting their hose.

It took 3 minutes to the employee of the private company, Unelco, managing the town water to increase the water pressure in front of the fire scene once they were asked more than an hour after the beginning of the fire. By that time it was too late.

Two fire trucks arrived at the fire scene within 5 minutes but encountered problems namely:

1. The pressure of water from the hydrant was low;
2. The gablin which connects the fire hose to the hydrant, in one of the trucks, did not fit the hydrant;
3. The firemen did not contact Unelco on its emergency number.
4. One of the trucks developed problems in its pumps;
5. The firemen did not know of an underground valve to increase the water pressure;

In 1993 the government transferred the management and operation of the water services in Port Vila to Unelco, a private company. The water system and distribution of water then became the responsibility of Unelco.

It took the Vanuatu Fire Service more than an hour to get Unelco increase the water pressure.

Had they contacted Unelco on its emergency number the problem of water pressure would have been sorted out much quicker.

By the time the water pressure was increased by an employee of Unelco, fire had already spread and there was little hope in putting it out.

In this report the Ombudsman revealed that:

Administrative practice of Vanuatu Fire Services is defective in that there is no standard training on operating procedures.

The firemen were not aware of Unelco emergency number and did not know who to contact regarding the water problem. They had never met with Unelco to understand better the water system or to enforce the article 19 of the Government agreement stating that *"in the event of fire, the available and qualified personnel of the operator shall be placed at the disposal of the appropriate authority to operate the network"*. These problems arose at the time because there was no regular fire drills, no fire fighting procedures and no training manuals. Even the person in charge does not have clear guidelines.

The administrative practice of the Vanuatu Fire Services is defective in that equipment are not maintained and replaced.

No funds are put aside to buy new equipment, or even equipment which is necessary for repairs. It was evidenced at the fire scene that the firemen were forced to use hoses with holes in them.

The Police Act is defective in that there are no laws governing the Fire Services in Vanuatu.

The Act generally allocates the protection of property to Police but does not provide specifically for a Fire Service. It also does not give Vanuatu Fire Service the responsibility to put out fires. Often the people trained for that particular fire-fighting job are transferred in other posts of the Police.

The Ombudsman recommended:

1. The Police Commissioner and the Minister of Internal Affairs to ensure that the management of the Fire Services is strengthened. This includes:
 - regular fire drills
 - regular training of firemen
 - operation manual
 - equipment maintenance
 - effective liaison with Unelco
2. The Police Commissioner and Minister of Internal Affairs to ensure that funds are available to maintain, repair or replace fire equipment; so that Fire Service can provide a reasonable level of service to the people. Fire Service funds should not be blended with the Police Force funds.
3. Minister of Internal Affairs to initiate development of fire-fighting Legislation, separate from the Police Act to govern its functions, management, accountability and its officers.

1. JURISDICTION

- 1.1 The Constitution and the Ombudsman Act allow me to look into the conduct of government, related bodies, and Leaders. I can also look into defects in law and administrative practices, including the Vanuatu Fire Service (VFS).

2. PURPOSE, SCOPE OF INVESTIGATION AND METHODS USED

- 2.1 The scope of this investigation is to establish the facts about the failure of the Vanuatu Fire Service to put out the fire on 6 May 1998 and to determine whether the administrative practice of VFS is defective and the Police Act is defective
- 2.2 This Office collected information and documents by informal request, summons, letters, interviews and research.

3. RELEVANT LAWS, REGULATIONS AND RULES

- 4.13 Police Act Cap 105.

FUNCTIONS OF THE FORCE

- 4(2) The Force shall be employed throughout Vanuatu and its territorial waters for –
- (a) the preservation of peace and the maintenance of order;
 - (b) **the Protection of life and property;**
 - (c) the enforcement of laws;
 - (d) the prevention and detection of offences and the production of offenders before Courts; and
 - (e) such other duties as may be expressly provided for by law

4. OUTLINE OF EVENTS

BACKGROUND

- 4.1 On 23 December 1993 the Government transferred the management and operation of water services in Port Vila to Unelco a private company. The agreement set out the responsibilities of Unelco, the Government and other matters such as the responsibilities and the rights regarding hydrants. Article 19 of the agreement states as follows:

Fire hydrants on public roads shall be maintained, renewed, installed, moved or removed by the operator at the expense of the fire fighting service. In the event of fire, the available and qualified personnel of the operator shall be placed at the disposal of the appropriate authority to operate the network

The operator shall supply, free of charge, water to fire hydrants on public roads which are used for the sole use of fire fighting and training exercises of the fire brigade within reasonable limits. In no case shall fire hydrants be used for the washing of roads or gutters or for any other use than fire fighting. Fire hydrants may only be operated by the fire brigade or by employees of the operator.

- 4.3 On 6 May 1998 at approximately 05.00am an anonymous telephone call was received at Santo Fire Service in Luganville advising of a fire at Snoopys. The person gave no other details. As the Officer could not make outgoing calls, Vila fire station was not alerted. At 05:30am a taxi driver reported the fire to Police headquarters in Port Vila.
- 4.4 A police officer immediately rang the VFS and reported that there was a fire near the post office. Immediately, the special fire siren at the fire station was switched on alerting the other firemen who were not on shift but living near and outside the station to make their way to the station.
- 4.5 Two officers immediately went to the scene of the fire in the truck "Fire 4". The truck had 2,500 litres of water in it and was full. By the time they reached Snoopys at approximately 05.35am, the flames were coming out at the roof indicating that it may

have started some time before. About 3 minutes later, Sakari Faithful the officer in charge of VFS, came to the scene in his vehicle "Rescue 1". As the fire appeared to be a big one, the assistance of the second fire truck "Fire 3" was requested.

- 4.6 They fought the fire at the shop Snoopys using the water in "Fire 4" with a 38mm hose. One officer fought the fire while another officer was operating the pump and was also looking for the fire hydrant. They used the 38mm hose to ration the water in the tank until they were connected to the hydrant which they eventually found. It took them about two minutes to connect to the hydrant.
- 4.7 While water was being used from the tank in "Fire 4", they tried to connect the 64mm water hose to the hydrant. The gablin, a metal piece which connects the hose to the hydrant, did not fit the Unelco hydrant.
- 4.8 The second fire truck "Fire 3" had arrived at the scene of the fire by this time and had located itself between the Government Building and Frank King Tours on the instruction of Mr Faithful, as the fire was threatening the Government Building. The officers on the truck started fighting the fire at Frank King Tours with a 64mm hose.
- 4.9 "Fire 3" was connected to a standing fire hydrant at Government Building. However, it shortly started developing problems with its pump because there was not enough water from the hydrant and therefore the pump was sucking air into the tank. As the water pressure from the hydrant was too low, they could not fight the fire.
- 4.10 The heat from the fire increased dramatically, forcing "Fire 3" to move away from the area and relocate on Kumul Highway the main street in front of Snoopys. Due to the constant problem of low water pressure, the firemen used the portable pump (Wajax Pump). They connected the pump to the tank of "Fire 3" and continued fighting the fire with a 41mm hose branching off into two. **(Appendix A)**
- 4.11 Officers fitted the hose from Fire 4 to a nearby underground hydrant. However, there was not enough water pressure to fill the tank of truck Fire 4 even though the valve was fully opened. Because the pressure they were getting from the hydrant was only 6.5 bars, they were using only one hose. Officers did not know that there was another valve to increase the pressure of water in that area. At the same time, firemen in "Fire 3" were also having problems with the low water pressure.
- 4.12 An off-duty fireman came to assist and found that there was not enough water coming into the fire truck because there was not enough pressure. He heard his colleagues from "Fire 3" also calling out for water.
- 4.19 As there was not enough water coming from the hydrant, a fireman drove "Fire 4" to the hydrant near Olympic Court to see if the pressure was stronger in order to fill the tank. On arrival he connected to the hydrant but found that the pressure was too low and would take time. He decided to go to the fire station to use the hydrant at the station. The pressure was also low so he then drove back to the scene of the fire with about half the tank full. This took about an hour. A hydrant with water pressure of 10 bars and above would take approximately 3 to 4 minutes to fill the tank.
- 4.14 Mr Faithful spoke to a Unelco officer who was on duty directly opposite the fire area. The Unelco officer began to look around for the place to increase the water pressure.
- 4.15 Mr Faithful took Rescue 1 to find a particular employee of Unelco who he believed would know how to increase the pressure. He was away from the scene for approximately an hour and could not find the man. Mr Faithful then contacted the Civil Aviation Fire Service and requested their assistance. However, this fire service could not respond immediately because they were expecting an international flight and all their units were required at the airport.
- 4.16 Approximately at 7.00 am, another Unelco employee arrived at the scene. He walked to Unelco station and saw that it was not Unelco that was on fire but another building. He stood at Unelco station watching the firemen without realising that there were

problems with the water pressure. However, when he was instructed by one of his employers to open a valve at the fire scene, he collected the necessary key from the power station. This is a piece of metal that is used to tighten or loosen valves. He went to the main road at the scene of the fire and removed a cement slab which was the lid to the underground main water pipes where the control valve was situated (**Appendix B**). He fitted the key to the valve, turned the key and loosened the valve. This process took approximately 3 minutes. This valve controls the water flow in the main water pipe running past the fire scene and to the Government Building at Kumul Highway.

- 4.17 This increased the water pressure which allowed the tank to be filled quickly and caused a strong flow of water from the tank. The pump operator on "Fire 4" then increased the number of hoses from one to three hoses with an additional hose reel leading from the truck to the fire (**Appendix C**). "Fire 3" was also filled quickly, however the Wajax pump was used because of the problem developed earlier in the truck pump.
- 4.18 By this time the fire had already spread to Snoopys and Paris Shopping and there was little hope of putting it out. The firemen only managed to save part of the building and the small restaurant near Snoopys.
2. At 8:00am the Civil Aviation Fire truck came to assist. The fire was completely put out later that afternoon at about 3.00 pm.
- 4.20 The VFS is part of the Vanuatu Mobile Force (VMF) supervised by a commander Lieutenant Colonel Api Jack Usamoli. The VMF is part of the Vanuatu Police Force under the supervision of the Commissioner of Police Mr Peter Bong.
- 4.21 In a similar fire which burnt down the General Store warehouse early in March 1999 there were allegations that the Fire Service did not get the water pumping until sometime later. By that time it was too late to save the building.

5. RESPONSES BY THOSE INVOLVED

- 5.1 During May 1998, the Office of the Ombudsman interviewed the officer in charge of the VFS, members who were on duty on the day of the fire, as well as those who were not on duty but came to assist their colleagues and a New Zealand fire training officer. These people stated:
- All firemen have received fire-fighting training locally. Some have also received further training in New Zealand.
 - At present Vila VFS has a total manpower of 10. In the past there have always been 5 or 6 men on call during each 24 hour shift. With the restructuring of the Police Force in 1998, only three firemen are on each 24 hour shift. About twenty people have been trained in fire fighting so far, however many of them have been transferred out of the VFS to other units of Vanuatu Mobile Force (VMF) while some have been transferred to Police Department in the general duty section and no new persons trained. There are not enough firemen available all the time.
 - It has been the VFS standard practice that 5 or 6 firemen were always on shift and when there was a fire, one person looked after the station while the rest went to fight the fire. At the time of this fire, there were only three firemen on shift, two of them to go to the fire while the third person looked after the station.
 - Both tanks in "Fire 3" and "Fire 4" were full with water when they arrived at the scene. "Fire 3" had 1500 litres and Fire 4 had 2500 litres.

- The fire must have started well before 5.00am because on arrival, flames were coming out of the roof. This meant that the fire had already consumed the inside area of the building and the Snoopy storage area and Frank King Tours were already on fire before the arrival of the first and the second truck.
- The pressure from the hydrants was lower than that of the hoses through the pump. Although they were using only one hose from each of the trucks, the water from the hydrants could not fill up the tanks. The water pressure from the hydrants was only six and a half bars whereas the pumps on the trucks were producing eight bars. This meant that the tanks were emptying faster than the water could be replaced. Two hoses can be connected from Fire 3 and four hoses can be connected from Fire 4 at one time.
- While firemen knew about the underground and standing hydrants, they did not know that there was an underground valve in front of the burning building which adjusts the water pressure.
- About an hour had passed from the time the low water pressure was discovered until the time that Unelco increased pressure. By that time, the fire had already engulfed both shops, Snoopys and Paris Shopping.
- Fire 3 developed problems with its pump because of the lack of water from the hydrant to fill the tank. Air got into the system and created an airlock in the system thus water could not come out. They tried all the necessary procedures to clear the airlock but could not clear it.
- The hoses they used had holes in them because they were old (**Refer to Appendix A**). They could not buy new fire hoses due to lack of funds. They also could not repair the hoses because of the lack of funds to purchase the equipment necessary for repairs.
- Only one fire drill was conducted in 1998 due to fuel restrictions, and there were no liaising or communication between Unelco and the VFS.
- Trucks, rescue gear, generators and portable pumps are tested at least once a week.
- With the size of the pumps they have in the trucks the water in the trucks would last only 90 seconds.
- Some equipment needs replacing and maintenance.
- VFS need middle management and fire management training.
- VFS has no fire fighting procedures and no training manuals.
- An overseas order was placed in 1997 for new equipment including hoses and a hose repair kit but due to lack of funds no new equipment was purchase. The price of a hose was NZ\$300.00 (approximately VT20.000) and \$501.90 (approximately Vt34.000) for a hose repair kit and accessories. We were informed that funds for VFS has been included in the Police 1999 budget. In 1998 the budget of the Police was VT600 million.

5.2 During May 1998, the Ombudsman Office interviewed three water section staff from Unelco. They commented as follows:

- The main town of Port Vila is supplied with water from the tanks next to the Reserve Bank of Vanuatu. If there is problem, supply can come also from the tanks above the Court House. The water levels are regulated by automatic regulators. The VMF area is supplied with water from the tanks at Ohlen.
- The main street on Kumul Highway has a main water pipe running from Olympic Court to Calvo Store. This supplies water to all the areas between these two places within Port Vila town.
- The fittings that the VMF has do not fit the water pipes at the Post Office.

- Unelco has an emergency number (No 22744) in case of water problems.
 - Unelco, when asked, did help the VMF in fighting the fire. They connected a hose from the station and used it to put out the fire (**Appendix D**).
 - The water pressure from the hydrants was around six and a half bars. At that time of the morning there would be a maximum water pressure in the network.
 - A valve was opened at the front of Paris Shopping to increase the water flow in the pipes.
 - Unelco has met with the officer in charge of VFS from time to time on water issues. When there are changes in the water system or new hydrants are installed VFS is always advised.
- 5.3 The working paper on this matter was issued on 19 March 1999 to the following people to give an opportunity to reply:
- Mr Johnson Lava
 - Mr Boma Avia
 - Mr Sakari Faithfull
 - Mr Peter Bong
 - Mr Jean François Barbeau
 - Mr Basil Tereleo
 - Mr Ben Tamas
 - Mr Frank Tasaruru
 - Mr Stephen Parry Peretini
 - Mr Joseph Litch
 - Mr Pierre Kalorib
- 5.4 Response was received only from Superintendent S. Saling, Senior Legal Officer, on behalf of the Police Commissioner, Mr Peter Bong.
- 5.5 In his reply the Police Commissioner stated that it was the Vila Police Station that first received the report on the fire. Also that Luganville Fire Brigade has telephone facilities and is still operating since 1980. He further stated that there are regular fire drills, there is fire fighting procedure and training manual available for all firemen personnels. That by publishing my report it will encourage and educate arsonists to broaden their skills on this illegal activity.
- 5.6 **Comments**
- We contacted the Fire Section in Luganville on 10 June 1998 and spoke to a Fire Officer who was on duty at the time. He confirmed receiving a telephone call from an anonymous person that there was a fire at Snoopy. The person gave no further details and hang up the phone. The Fire Officer could not ring Vila at the time because they could not make outward calls on the telephone they have at the Station.
- 5.7 During interviews under oath with officers of the Fire Service and a New Zealand Fire Training Officer it was confirmed that in 1998 there was only one fire drill conducted due to fuel restrictions. We have not seen any fire fighting procedures nor a training manual despite repeated requests to the officer in charge of the Vanuatu Fire Service.
- 5.8 The purpose of this report is to set out what was wrong with the Fire Service at the time of the fire and the continuous problems the firemen are having. The conditions of the fire fighting equipment are of public knowledge as they have been witnessed and seen during this fire and other fires. There have been similar fires prior to this one and the Police are still hunting for the suspects. A public report with constructive recommendations is designed to promote positive changes and improvements to the system.

6. FINDINGS

6.1 Finding 1: **The administrative practice of the Vanuatu Fire Services is defective in that there are no standard training and operating procedures.**

- 6.1.1 This investigation revealed that firemen had no knowledge of the water system, including the underground valves. They were not aware of the Unelco emergency number, and did not know who to contact regarding the water supply. They never met with Unelco to understand better the water supply and to coordinate with them and to understand better the water system or to enforce the article 19 of the Government agreement stating that *"in the event of fire, the available and qualified personnel of the operator shall be placed at the disposal of the appropriate authority to operate the network."* They could have had regular meetings with Unelco to prepare themselves to such events and this did not require fuel!

The problem which arose during the Snoopy's Fire are systemic. The fault is both due to failures of the Fire Fighting System, and also to individuals in charge.

- 6.1.2 The costly delays in putting out the fire could have been avoided if the water pressure problems had been immediately understood and resolved.
- 6.1.3 However it is hardly surprising that the problems arose were not quickly resolved as there are no regular fire drills, no fire fighting procedures and training manuals and even the person in charge does not have clear guidelines.

6.2 Finding 2: **The administrative practice of the Vanuatu Fire Services is defective in that equipment is not maintained and replaced.**

- 6.2.1 To compound the problem of lack of procedure, equipment is either not available or not efficiently maintained. Funds are not put aside to buy new equipment, or even equipment which is necessary for repairs. This was clearly evidenced at the scene of the fire as firefighters were forced to use hoses with holes in them. Had the Santo fire station been equipped with a telephone which could call outside, fire fighters in Vila would have been informed 30 minutes earlier of the fire.

6.3 Finding 3: **The law is defective in that there are no laws governing Fire service in Vanuatu.**

- 6.3.1 The Police Act is defective in that it generally allocates the protection of property to the police but does not provide specifically for a fire service or any of its procedures.
- 6.3.2 There is nothing available to guide the Police Force in the event of a fire. The Act does not provide for a fire service nor does it give Vanuatu Fire Service the responsibility to put out fires.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Recommendation 1:

The Police Commissioner and the Minister of Internal Affairs to ensure that the management of the Fire Service is strengthened, and that its practices include

- regular training for firefighters,
- fire drills,
- operations manuals which are available and used,
- regular equipment maintenance and repair, and
- effective liaison with Unelco.

Recommendation 2:

The Police Commissioner and the Minister of Internal Affairs to take all necessary steps to ensure that funds are available (from the existing budget or supplementary estimates) to properly maintain, repair and replace fire equipment, so that the Fire Service can provide a reasonable level of service to the people. Fire Service funds should not be blended with Police Force funds.

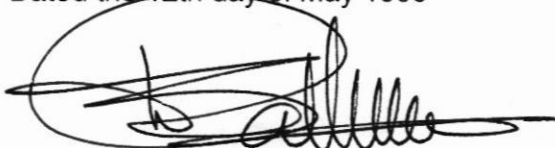
Recommendation 3:

The Minister of Internal Affairs to initiate the development of firefighting legislation, separate from the Police Act, to govern the Fire Service's functions, management, accountability, officers, etc.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 In accordance with Article 63(2) of the Constitution and Section 22 of the Ombudsman Act, the Ombudsman requests the Commissioner of Police and the Minister of Internal Affairs to consider these recommendations and put them into effect.
- 8.2 The Ombudsman must be notified within thirty (30) days of the date of this report outlining the decision and steps proposed to implement the recommendations.

Dated the 12th day of May 1999



Marie-Noëlle FERRIEUX PATTERSON
OMBUDSMAN OF THE REPUBLIC OF VANUATU

8. INDEX OF APPENDICES

- A** Wajax pump used due to problems developed by "Fire 3"
- B** Position of underground valve where water pressure was increased
- C** Number of hoses increased after increased water pressure
- D** Unelco staff assisting VFS firemen
- E** Responses