

**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**

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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).