

## Fiji: Training on Trauma and Conflict Transformation

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A series of military coups has left Fijians on all sides of the conflict with a sense of trauma and fear. The military and police have suffered in particular. Many of them perpetrated violence when taking part in repressing public protests against the coups. Those who are part of Fiji's longstanding commitment to UN peacekeeping witnessed or experienced violence when serving in peacekeeping missions in Iraq, Lebanon, Sinai, Golan Heights, Sudan, or Timor Leste. Finally, some of the ex-military personal also committed or suffered from violence when participating as mercenaries/private contractors in other conflicts. Fijian security forces thus had ample exposure to trauma, although it was never addressed institutionally. As in many other cultures, state institutions do not address stress and trauma. This work is left to religious authorities or the individual's private realm. For the most part, superiors simply taught the forces under their command "be tough" and encouraged them not to let stress or trauma affect them. But given the stressful nature of international military deployments and the tense situations with local communities, institutional leaders recognised they needed better understanding of trauma and stress, and ways of handling it.

### **The challenge**

Trauma and stress impact the wellbeing of many people in society and in the security forces.

### **Theory of change:**

Build the capacity of the security sector to understand the impact of trauma and stress on their society.

The Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) first requested training from civil society organisations to broaden their understanding of conflict analysis, restorative justice and trauma awareness for the Officers Training School in 2003, following the coup in 2000. The Fijian civil society organisation called ECREA (Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education, and Advocacy) was tasked with developing a course.

Then after the 2006 coup, they also commissioned training on community engagements. After the coup, a lot more military officers began taking up posts in government. The military was extending their role into policing and often conducting joint military-police operations within Fiji. But relationships between the military and civil society were hostile. NGOs had largely opposed the military coup. Some NGOs had affiliations with political parties. For these reasons, the military largely distrusted NGOs and questioned their funding and motivations. The experience of Fijian forces abroad, primarily in Iraq, and the experience in the coup contributed to a growing concern that on the military and police use of force on Fijian citizens at home. Despite these mixed feelings and perceptions about NGOs, the military again turned to civil society – this time the Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding (PCP), a local peacebuilding NGO that works to transform, reduce and prevent conflict in the Pacific - to conduct debriefing sessions with the military, Fiji Police and Fiji Correction Services about their relationships with communities. Their work began in 2007.



**Photo 9: Joint training in trauma. Photo Credit: Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding**

Both organisations developed an interactive training approach that emphasised relationship building, peacebuilding skills and processes, and whole-of-community participation.

While trauma and stress are not often topics included in peacebuilding training for either civil society or security forces, understanding these concepts and how to develop resilience is necessary for all stakeholders in any context where violence is present. It is important for civil society and security sector personnel to recognise how trauma at work or in the public can translate into violence in the home as well. Trauma can contribute to gender-based violence. Training in trauma awareness can help people understand the cycles of violence and why traumatised people often go on to traumatise others. Training on how to manage stress and trauma can reduce the likelihood of violence, especially between security forces and civil society.

PCP held discussions with military leaders to assess the needs and types of participants who should be invited for a training on trauma awareness and to conduct a context analysis to ensure workshops took into account the needs and interests of all stakeholders. Together they decided to include all branches of security forces, as all groups needed to learn how to interact with civilians by using communication skills like dialogue and negotiation instead of using force. Workshops covered a range of topics, beginning with conflict analysis, to help security forces recognise that there are different ways of perceiving events and that people's behaviours are motivated by their diverse perceptions and experiences. Workshops also included lessons on stress and trauma, as well as conflict transformation skills in dialogue, negotiation and mediation.

Often military and police personnel were directed to come and had no choice in attending and/or had no idea what they were attending. They were very experienced officers who worked in both peacekeeping operations, and logistics. They were mostly Indigenous Fijians or



**Photo 10: Conflict analysis tools. Photo Credit: Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding**

“iTaukei” military personnel. The military’s usual mode of instruction was 55-minute lectures, with very little time given for question and answer. Given PCP’s recognition that lectures only make a limited impact, PCP’s teaching style was elicitive and participatory using a combination of visual and interactive methods that reinforced key ideas.

Growing out of the relationships made in these initial trainings, other joint work with the police became possible. PCP staff works with the Fiji Police Force to teach secondary school students and leaders the value of restorative justice. Restorative justice is a process that holds offenders accountable by directly engaging with the victims or those they have harmed. A dialogue between victim and offender allows for both of them to make amends to each other. Unlike punishments that focus on the motives and sentences for perpetrators, restorative justice focuses on how to recompense victims for the suffering they have experienced. Since Fijian teachers can lose their jobs for improper uses of punishment, teachers and school administrators were eager to learn about restorative justice and come up with alternative options for correcting student behaviours.

When 45 Fijian peacekeepers were kidnapped and held in the Golan Heights by a Syrian rebel group in September 2014, there was concern that anti-Muslim feelings from the kidnapping would increase the possibility of violence toward Indo-Fijians, some of whom are Muslim, in the run up to the National Elections. PCP provided advice to assist the Fijian military on how to handle this situation with the affected families in Fiji until the Fijian peacekeepers were eventually freed.

