



FORTNIGHTLY SECURITY UPDATE (FSU)

Vanuatu

Significant number of car crashes: In the second quarter of 2024, the Vanuatu Police Force (VPF) Traffic Unit [recorded](#) 158 vehicle crashes, marking a jump in numbers compared to the first quarter. A series of accidents in Port Vila in September suggests the trend continues. Two people were [hospitalised](#) after incidents on 5 September. On 15 September, five were hospitalised and one died after a severe [crash](#). And yesterday, another [accident](#) occurred at Fatumaru Bay.

In the wake of recent, serious accidents, the VPF again urged drivers to ensure they comply with all legal requirements, including having a valid driver's license, up-to-date insurance, roadworthy vehicle certificates, and other necessary permits. Police also stressed the importance of avoiding alcohol or substances that impair driving and cause accidents.

Comment: *Traffic accidents threaten public safety, put a strain on healthcare systems, and damage our economy. Widespread coverage of serious accidents undermines residents' respect for the laws of the land and risks harming Vanuatu's reputation as a tourist destination.*

Increased enforcement of traffic laws, drink-driving awareness campaigns and the promotion of alternative transportation by venues that sell

alcohol could help counter the rise in accidents and ensure a safer environment for all.



Images of crashes on 5, 15, and 19 September 2024

Redeveloped Cook Barracks officially opened:

During his visit to Port Vila yesterday, Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Marles and Prime Minister Salwai Tabimasmass [inaugurated](#) the barracks. The new facilities include new engineer and vehicle workshops, accommodation and training facilities, a fire station, chapel, and a medical centre.

Operated by the VPF and VMF, the enhancements are aimed at supporting Vanuatu security forces' operational capabilities and community service. Over 1,000 workers, including 83% from Vanuatu, were involved in project and 700 workers gained qualifications or certifications through in-country training institutions during the build.



Official Opening of Cook Barracks, 19 September



Comment: The Cook Barracks redevelopment and other recent projects show the benefits of the security relationship with Australia. Last month, vehicles, vessels and other equipment were [gifted](#) to the VPF and VMF. And in March this year, Tiroas Barracks facilities were handed over to the VPF and VMF in Luganville. Prime Minister Salwai has [emphasised](#) that such facilities help “boost the morale” of the VMF, which matters as Vanuatu remains vulnerable to natural disasters.

These high-quality projects should help improve the quality of the security forces’ work, with flow-on benefits for citizens. Effective management and maintenance of the resources will be vital to ensure they continue to serve our people well.

Regional

Clashes continue in New Caledonia ahead of bipartisan delegation visit to Paris: Two more people were [killed](#) after conflicts between police and residents of Saint Louis, near Nouméa. The situation remains tense and the FLNKS has [denounced](#) the police methods as “barbaric and humiliating”. The death toll since rioting began in May now stands at 13, including two gendarmes and 11 civilians. French authorities have also announced stricter curfew hours ahead the 24 September anniversary of France “taking possession” of New Caledonia in 1853. Extra gendarmes have also been [deployed](#).

Meanwhile, a bipartisan delegation from New Caledonia is [scheduled](#) to travel to Paris from 23 September until 4 October to meet officials, including the presidents of both Houses of Parliament.

Comment: Even with extra gendarmes deployed, French security forces will likely struggle to control

the situation in Saint Louis, which has long been a security hot-spot and is often described as pro-independence “stronghold”.

A request for Paris to fund a 542 billion vatu New Caledonia “reconstruction plan” will probably be high on the bipartisan delegation’s agenda. But rifts between pro-independence parties could see key figures refuse to join the trip. It will probably be hard for the Pacific Islands Forum to organise its visit to New Caledonia for the time being.



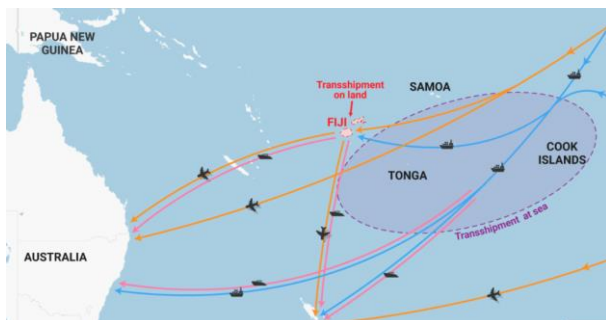
Gendarmes block a road in Mont-Dore, New Caledonia on 19 September 2024.

Tonga and Fiji face growing drugs problems: Two suspected members of the Comancheros, an Outlaw Motorcycle Gang (OMCG), were last week [arrested](#) and charged for “participation in an organised crime group” by Tonga’s Police. Last month, 17 people were apprehended and several kilograms of methamphetamine, as well as firearms and ammunition, were seized in raids across Tonga’s main island. A customs officer, a prison officer, and a prominent businessman were among those arrested.

Meanwhile, Fiji Deputy Prime Minister Prasad [expressed](#) concern over the rising number of drug cases among Fiji’s youth. Fiji is [facing](#) growing problems around methamphetamine usage in the community. In January, police [captured](#) almost five tonnes of methamphetamine destined for Australia and New Zealand markets. 15 people were charged in relation to the drug bust.

Comment: Pacific Islands Countries have long been a [transit point](#) for narcotics from Asia and the Americas to high-paying markets in Australia and New Zealand. However, increased local consumption and cheaper hard drugs like meth have worsened the issue. Drug trafficking will likely pose an increasingly serious challenge in our region as strong, synthetic drugs become cheaper and more widely available.

The markets for hard drugs like heroin, cocaine and meth are relatively small in Vanuatu for now. But the explosion of drugs in Fiji, Tonga and elsewhere suggests Vanuatu may soon be tested. Clear legislation covering new synthetic drugs, and ongoing cooperation with international institutions and regional partners could help protect our community, culture and traditions.



Fiji is often used as a transit point for meth and cocaine on its way to Australia and New Zealand.

Marape retains power as tribal violence spikes: Prime Minister Marape [defeated](#) a vote of no confidence against him on 12 September, with 75 votes in his favour and 32 against, before adjourning parliament.

Meanwhile, Barrick Gold [suspended](#) operations at its Porgera gold mine in PNG after tribal [violence](#) saw at least 30 people killed. Police have been given emergency powers, including the use of lethal force, to contain the violence between squatting near the mine and local landowners.

Comment: The Porgera mine once accounted for around 10% of PNG's yearly export earnings, but a slow government takeover and increased tribal violence have stalled production. Tribal conflicts are a frequent occurrence in PNG's highlands, but an influx of automatic weapons has worsened death-tolls and seen violence reach new heights.

Pope Francis urged PNG to "stop the spiral" of violence during his visit to PNG earlier this month but fighting over the distribution of the country's natural resource wealth seems unlikely to slow down any time soon.



PNG security personnel have been authorised to use "lethal force" to quell fighting.

China accused of cyber-attack against Pacific Island Forum Secretariat: The ABC last week [reported](#) that cyber specialists were sent to Fiji after the PIF Secretariat's networks were infiltrated by Chinese state-backed hackers. The hackers reportedly sought to gather information on Secretariat operations as well as information about its communications with PIF members.

The attack was first detected in February this year, although the hackers are assessed to have gained access well before that. Over time, cyber security specialists worked with the PIF to get rid of the hackers and repair computer networks.

PIF head Waqa [confirmed](#) that there was a "cyber security incident", but said his team wasn't yet ready make accusations about who was behind it.

Waqa said, he'd wait for a forensic report on the issue to be finalised. Meanwhile, China's embassy in Fiji [denied](#) that Beijing was behind the attack, describing the issue as, "a made-up story".

Comment: Governments, major corporations and individuals all over the world face growing cyber threats from organised crime groups and states. Several governments and corporations in our region have been hit by largescale ransomware attacks in recent years.

Strong, up-to-date laws and skilled teams with expertise in cyber security skills will become more important in the years ahead. Regional support, like Australia's roving cyber security specialists, can also play a useful role.



PIF Secretary General Baron Waqa at the 53rd leaders' summit in Tonga on 27 August 2024.

International

Methane emissions 'rising faster than ever': Researchers have [warned](#) that concentrations of the greenhouse gas, methane, have risen by 20% over the past 20 years and are increasing faster. Methane is seen as the second largest contributor to climate change after carbon dioxide.

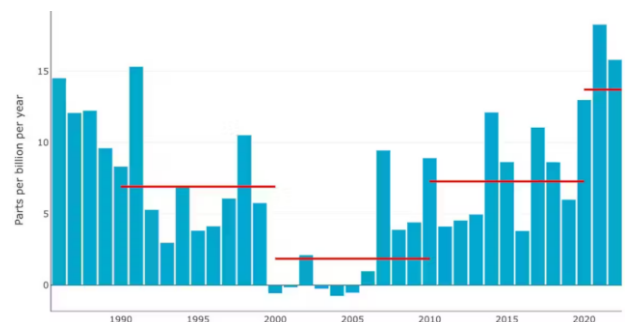
According to a [study](#) published by the [Global Carbon Project](#) on 10 September, human activities such as farming livestock, coal mining, extracting and handling natural gas, growing rice

in paddies, and putting organic waste in landfills contribute about 65% of all methane emissions. Of this, agriculture (livestock and rice paddies) contributes 40%, fossil fuels 36%, and landfills and wastewater 17%.

Researchers [said](#) that methane emissions have continued to increase all over the world, with the exception of Europe and Australia, which have shown a slow decline. The largest increases have come from China and Southeast Asia and are primarily linked to coal extraction, oil and gas production and landfills.

Comment: The rapid rise in methane levels puts global climate goals in serious jeopardy. Carbon dioxide has, rightly, been the focus to counter warming, but studies methane is responsible for about 0.5°C worth of temperature increases since the pre-industrial era.

The 2021 Global Methane Pledge saw 150 nations agree to cut methane emissions by 30% by the end of the decade but progress will probably be hard to make unless China, Russia and India also join.



Annual global atmospheric methane amounts. Red lines indicate the average for the decade.

Fears of major Israel-Lebanon conflict grow: The leader of Hezbollah has [vowed](#) to keep up daily strikes against Israel despite this week's deadly sabotage of Hezbollah's communication devices. At least 32 people were killed when thousands of

paggers and walkie-talkies [detonated](#) over two days. The attacks were widely blamed on Israel, raising fears the conflict could become an all-out war. Israel has also [launched](#) big air raids against southern Lebanon, since Hezbollah began striking Israel, soon after the 7 October attack by Hamas, that sparked the Israel-Hamas war.

Meanwhile, Pacific Islands Countries were [split](#) in how they voted at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on a Palestinian-drafted resolution demanding Israel end its “unlawful presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory within 12 months”.

In total 124 (out of 181) member states voted in favour of the resolution, including Marshall Islands, New Zealand, and Solomon Islands. While Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, PNG, Tonga and Tuvalu were among only 14 countries that opposed the motion. 43 abstained, including Australia, Kiribati, Samoa and Vanuatu.



Exploded walkie-talkies in Lebanon on 18 September.

Comment: Some analysts suggest the attacks against Hezbollah’s communications systems point to the possibility of a much larger Israeli military operation to come. Meanwhile intense fighting between Israel and Hamas continues in the occupied Palestinian territories.

The UNGA vote was a nonbinding measure but will probably serve to isolate Israel just days before

world leaders come together for the annual UN gathering in New York.

US presidential election race very tight: Ahead of the election on 5 November, polling data suggests Democrat Kamala Harris gained a boost following her strong [performance](#) in the 10 September debate against Trump. Prominent statistician, Nate Silver, has [suggested](#) that Harris currently leads Republican Donald Trump in the popular vote by 48.9 – 46.0. But Silver also predicts Trump has a 56.2% chance of winning the electoral college vote, which decides the presidency.

Separately, investigations are continuing after a second attempted [assassination](#) of Trump last Sunday. The suspect had camped out for nearly 12 hours with food and a rifle, waiting for Trump, before the Secret Service intervened.

Comment: *Harris brought new momentum to the Democrats’ campaign and nullified Republican claims that Biden was too old to be President again. By the time of the vote, Biden will be almost 82, Trump 78, and Harris will be 60. But the vote will likely be close*

The election outcome will influence how the US approaches issues of concern to Vanuatu, like climate change. Harris [says](#) climate change is an existential threat, which the US must act urgently to address, but Trump rejects climate science and believes human activity isn’t the main.



Republican presidential nominee Trump, and Democratic nominee Harris, on 10 September.