



[Print This Article](#) | [Close this window](#)

Heavy security for Papua New Guinea election

Thu May 10, 2007 12:34AM EDT

By Alexander Rheeney

PORT MORESBY, May 10 (Reuters) - More than 2,000 police, soldiers and prison officers will be deployed to Papua New Guinea's jungle-clad highlands to curb expected violence in the country's national elections starting in June.

Papua New Guinea's police commissioner Gari Baki said violence was expected due to the large number of firearms in the highlands, where bloody tribal wars are common.

Armed political gangs hijacked the 2002 election in the mountainous interior, killing opponents and destroying ballots boxes, forcing the election commission to declare six seats null and void, and reducing the size of parliament to 103 seats.

"We do not want to see a repeat of the failed 2002 elections, especially in the Southern Highlands Province," Baki told the Post Courier newspaper in Port Moresby on Thursday.

Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare will seek a fourth term as prime minister, heading a coalition of parties, with his former treasurer, Bart Philemon, his major opponent.

Nominations for the election, which will run from June 30 to July 10, close on Thursday. Around 3,000 candidates have so far registered to contest 109 seats, but electoral officials say the final number of candidates could be 4,000.

Corruption will be a major issue for this developing South Pacific nation which has struggled to benefit from its rich resource base. Most of its 5.1 million people live a subsistence lifestyle in the jungle highlands, where tribal warfare, sorcery, crime and political corruption are rife.

"Our inability as individuals and as a nation to commit ourselves to eliminating corruption increases daily," read an editorial headline in The National newspaper last week.

"Corruption has become an accepted part of daily life and is even seen as a victory over 'the system'."

Fuelling security fears ahead of the poll, former U.N. rights commissioner Mary Robinson -- now with aid agency Oxfam -- this week said three quarters of the PNG military's 7,500 assault rifles were now missing.

Baki said candidates must ensure free and fair elections and respect people's freedom to vote without intimidation or bribery.

"I think it's time we promoted the idea that Papua New Guineans are mature

and responsible people," he said.

While police will be the main force charged with enforcing security during the election, an extra 400 troops will be deployed in the special highlands operation -- the biggest security call-out for soldiers in any PNG election.

ELECTION TO A GOOD LIFE

Election to parliament is seen by many in PNG as a ticket to wealth and lawmakers are expected to share government funds generously with fellow villagers.

Thousands of people, many bare-breasted and wearing traditional grass skirts, rallied behind candidates as they nominated this week. Some travelled by boat from far flung island homes to cheer on their candidate.

In Port Moresby hundreds of commuters were left stranded as the majority of the city's buses were hired by candidates for their supporters.

Electoral Commissioner Andrew Trawen said 3.5 million people will cast a vote. In 2006 almost half the 4.9 million registered voters were regarded by the electoral commission as ghost voters and did not exist.

The electoral commission has worked for a year to update voter rolls, which show several Elvis Presleys registered to vote, alongside a handful of Tom Joneses and a couple of kings and queens.

"No democracy in the world today has an absolutely perfect electoral roll but we can safely say that our 2007 electoral roll would be substantially more accurate than those used in 1997 and the 2002 elections," Trawen said.

© Reuters 2006. All rights reserved. Republication or redistribution of Reuters content, including by caching, framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written permission of Reuters. The Reuters logo and the word "Reuters" are registered trademarks and trademarks of the Reuters group of companies around the world.

Reuters journalists are subject to the Reuters Editorial Handbook which requires fair presentation and disclosure of relevant interests.