

## When a generation goes missing

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Rotuma is a volcanic island about 465 kilometers north of Fiji. While it has been part of Fiji since 1881, Rotuman culture more closely resembles that of Polynesian islands to the east, most noticeably Tonga, Samoa and Futuna. A boat ride to Rotuma can take up to 36 hours while it is about one hour forty-five minutes away by plane. Features Editor FRED WESLEY was on Rotuma and came up with this report.

### Jolmea

David Michael Penjueli cuts a forlorn figure on the beachfront at Jolmea. The little village is now home to only five families and comes under Hapmak in the district of Itu'ti'u on the island of Rotuma.

It is sandwiched by the village of Malsa'a to the east and the government station at Ahau to the west.

Heavy rain and hurried patchwork on the sandy road that cuts through Jolmea have combined to stretch the composition of white sand on its beach.

The sand has inched its way over the rocky bottom that was once the hallmark of the Jolmea waters. Mango trees line the beach, their roots stretching out to sea.

Aisake Penjueli and his family, and Henry Manueli and his family share the front portion of the village, enjoying proximity to the beach.

Henry lives in a house built by the late Tipo and his family who now live in Fiji.

Sam and Aggie Penjueli live with their son Michael and his young family on the other side of the road in a six bedroom home built by the late Raki and Tausia Wesele. Two more families live a few metres away towards Ahau.

Jolmea, like some other parts of this little island in the Pacific, is home to a dwindling population. It sits to the north, facing the outlying islands of Uea and Hatana. Aisake's daughters attend school at Malhaha and Henry has a grandson in Class One. His children are all grown up and either married in Fiji or in other parts of the island.

Michael, 24, and his wife Filo have two young daughters. His sister and two brothers live in Fiji.

The families make up half of the population of Jolmea.

"About nine young men have moved to Fiji over the past two or three years," Michael says of the village population.

A total of eleven young men and women from the village have made the move south. A shed housing two pool tables overlooks the beach. Tarpaulins covering the tables have gathered dust.

A house that once stood between the homes of Aisake and Henry is no more. In its place is a stretch of sand under a canopy of trees.

An upturned boat with fibre glass bottom lies near the beach under one of the mango trees. Cracks on the bottom cry desperately for much needed repair work. Apart from the removal of hedges that once lined the three homes, not much else has changed over the past 20 years since my last visit.

The road is still sandy, branching out to concrete twin lanes over the rises to Ahau and to Malsa'a. Electricity is still rationed during the day, going off at around 10pm. Jolmea sits caged in by trees lining the beach and foliage stretching inland to mountains in the south.

With a population of 27 people, the village is an apt reflection of the worrying trend on the island.

The rural to urban drift has seen the island population reduce to about 2000 people. It threatens to tug at the very fabric of Rotuman society.

Michael is one of the very few young people who remain on the island.

Aware of the worrying trend, he expresses hope Rotuma will recover.

Productive age gap

Rotuma lacks job opportunities. This is a glaring fact on this beautiful island.

Questions remain over the lagging economic situation and whether it can be improved.

It's obviously a factor which has seen the majority of people in the 'productive' age group move on to greener pastures overseas.

Most head south to Fiji in search of a better future.

The 'productive' age group, covering high school leavers and those under the age of 40 is dwindling.

Poasa Nauluvula of the Ministry of Agriculture in Fiji noticed the glaring absence during Rotuma Day celebrations on May 13.

He reckons it is a sad state of affairs for an island already struggling economically.

"It's really not difficult to miss," he says.

"It's evident there are either very young people or very old people living here now."

Michael attributes the dwindling population to a lack of job opportunities.

"There are no jobs available here for young people," he says.

He spends about 45 minutes to an hour cutting enough copra to fill a bag which earns him \$4.

The hardest part of this exercise is manually hauling his bags of copra through the bush to a road for the council's truck to pick up.

"It's not an easy life, but I prefer this to living in Fiji," he shrugs. He tried out life on the fast lane, coming off with a stint in an internationally recognised fast food eatery in Suva and a three month stay in Sydney, Australia.

"I wasn't getting much in Suva. I lived in Nasinu and if mum asked for some money to be sent over, I had nothing left and relied on my relatives to pay my fare to work in the city," he says.

"In the end, I felt it wasn't worth the trouble, so I packed up and came back home."

Apart from the money he makes selling copra, he does part time work at the airport at Malhaha and works at the jetty when ships are in port.

Lord Wilson of Malsa'a agrees educational needs and employment opportunities far outweigh anything else on the minds of the people of Rotuma.

The Rotuma Council of Chiefs chairman Tarterani Rigamoto is relying on the interim Government's declaration in May, that Oinafa is now Rotuma's

international port of call, to boost its economy and subsequently keep its youths at home. It's bound to open up doors of opportunities, he reckons.

That and the new strip at the airport at Malhaha are factors he hopes can contribute to an economic boom.

Oinafa, however, according to a well placed source remains a sufferance port of call.

A sufferance port, according to our friend is 'a place other than an approved place of loading or unloading at which the controller may, subject to such conditions as he may either generally or in any particular case impose, allow any goods to be loaded or unloaded'.

Simply put ships planning to visit the island must get proper clearance from Suva. It's about uprooting customs staff and any other government officer related to offering clearances, from Fiji to Rotuma.

The state of the jetty at Oinafa will never cater for that any time soon.

Rotuma's woes are compounded by the fact the island has no opportunity for higher education.

Council representative, retired Major General Jioji Konrote picks out the absence of a Form Seven stream and tertiary education.

He reckons this and the lack of employment opportunities are factors contributing to the move south by the island's young people.

"A lot of our young people move to Fiji for higher education," he says.

"The problem is when they complete their education, there's no incentive to go back home to Rotuma."

Two pronged assault

The chiefs, Mr Konrote says, have plans for a two-pronged assault.

"It's about keeping the population on the island, and attracting those who have moved to Fiji, to go back to the island," he says.

He shrugs aside talk of procrastination over the years. "This is our watch now and we'd like to improve the lot of our people.

"We're not going to point fingers at anyone.

"I think it's about moving forward to enable Rotumans to utilise the resources that are available."

"The chiefs have endorsed us, myself and Doctor John Fatiaki, as representatives of the people to the interim Government.

"We are looking at utilising our natural resources agriculture and our untapped marine resources."

"Rotumans are like any other people who want tangible results."

Mr Konrote says a proposal is expected to be forwarded for the construction of a vocational training centre on the island.

"It would be good to have a facility similar to that of the Fiji Institute of Technology. It's a long term plan."

It's a plan Mr Wilson agrees is worth trying out.

"It'll help to reduce the number of our young people leaving," Mr Wilson says.

Charter

The council, Mr Konrote says, supports the vision of the interim Government's People's Charter.

"We don't support the coup. But we do support the principles contained in the charter to take Fiji forward."

In the end

As the sun slowly disappears over the horizon, casting shadows over the islands of Hatana and Uea, Michael mutters an inaudible plea for help.

It comes from the heart. It's about saving the lifeline of a people. It's unintentional, but the message is loud and clear.

Could the very fabric of Rotuman society be hanging in the balance? When the young leave, questions arise. There's a huge void in the generation line of the people in these breathtaking islands.

The clear turquoise waters blessed with sun-kissed beaches seem to have lost their hold on a generation that should be credited with productivity. But in the

face of criticism over the council's stand on the charter, Mr Konrote insists the future looks bright for the people of Rotuma.

"I think the future looks very promising," he says.

He offers a glimmer of hope for youngsters like Michael who have chosen to stay home. For them, home is where the heart is.