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Night patrol on one of Australia's toughest beats



"They don't get cheeky to us" ... night patrol staff help an intoxicated man into the back of the Tangentyere Council truck. The overstretched patrol fears funding cuts.

Photo: *Glenn Campbell*

August 23, 2007

AT FIRST, the scene that meets the Tangentyere night patrol appears delightful; colourful balloons tied at intervals along the high wire fence, and a hubbub of children and adults partying in the front yard of a house.

But then there is a glint of axes and a flash of green from raised beer cans. A worried woman's face appears at the patrol truck's window.

Men in a white Toyota visited the Larapinta town camp that afternoon and threatened the family, saying they would be back, she reports.

Rosyln Forrester, the patrol supervisor and a resident of this Alice Springs camp, says: "Put the kids inside. Don't drink too much. You got to be careful."

Ms Forrester squints at the scene from the driver's seat. "Who's growling now? What's that axe for?" The woman answers: "Waiting for that mob."

It is about payback. A boy died in a car accident on a country road. As part of "sorry business", his father wants the relative seen as the culprit to be punished in traditional style. But the relative is in jail, and his family must bear the brunt. Forrester, who has checked on the family for months, explains that this is no longer cultural payback, just revenge.

"I reckon you mob should call the police," she tells the woman, and promises the patrol will check back in an hour.

It's a snapshot from one of the most difficult beats in Australia. The patrol is always stretched. The night the *Herald* joins it, it must end at 9pm rather than 1.30am because one staffer is sick.

Now Ms Forrester fears she will lose at least one of its six workers when the Community Development Employment Project, which funds three positions, folds next month.

The federal Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough, says he knows that ending the project will cut Tangentyere Council's budget by a third. But he is doing it to introduce more effective job creation programs, he says.

The Aboriginal-run council has used the employment project as "top-up" to pay for staff it cannot otherwise afford. Because the council is staffed by town campers, people listen, says Forrester. This is something Mr Brough, with his use of the army to intervene in Northern Territory communities, does not understand, she says.

"You can't just walk in and know what's happening. We have got to have the knowledge of what family groups are fighting. We keep an eye on them. We can't get in the middle. We try to keep ahead of them. If we can save someone's life, we will do it."

After an unsuccessful search for the Toyota, the patrol returns to Larapinta to find the party winding down.

Dangerous work? "They don't get cheeky to us. They're angry, but they're not angry with us."

Debra Jopson and Joel Gibson

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