

History 350

Nigel Cooper

Lecturer: Dr Ian Campbell

19 September 1990

Essay Topic: The issues involved in the Bougainville conflict during 1988-90, the attempts at resolving it, and possibilities for the future of the island.

"Peace at last" was the hopeful headline in the *Post-Courier* of 6 August 1990, reporting the signing on 5 August of the "Endeavour Accord" by the leading Bougainvillean Joseph Kabui and Sir Michael Somare, Foreign Minister of Papua New Guinea, at the end of eight days of "the most difficult negotiations in my life"¹. The previous 20 months had witnessed a bitter secessionist civil war on Bougainville costing over 100 lives. The Bougainvilleans' desire for independence finds deep roots in their soil, literally. But it goes back beyond the discovery, in the 1960s, of the potential value of a huge copper and gold deposit in the Panguna region of South Bougainville. This discovery fed the secessionist ambitions of a few. However the Papua New Guinea Government wanted to avoid any break-up of the country which had many natural divisions - its mountainous terrain, 600 islands and 700 languages. They also desperately needed the income their 20% share in Bougainville Copper Ltd (BCL), a subsidiary of Con-Zinc Riotinto of Australia Ltd (CRA), the mining company granted the rights to extract the copper.

The 1970s saw pressure mounting for secession. A Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) two weeks before Papua New Guinea gained its independence in September, 1975 led to sanctions, protracted talks and, in 1978, the establishment of a system of provincial government for the whole country. This largely quelled secessionist sentiment in that generation.

The obvious issues involved in the Bougainvilleans' push for independence are part cultural, part geographical and part economic. Having jet black skin colour, they feel ethnically and socially different from the people of the rest of Papua New Guinea whom they call 'redskins'. They are the furthest island away from the mainland and feel they were neglected by the central government until a mining agreement with BCL. This was considered forward-looking in its day, but it soon brought resentment. Even the renegotiated agreement of 1974, which the World Bank called "fair to investors and beneficial to the country"² was resented because the main financial benefit from the copper mine went to the

¹Sir Michael Somare, speaking at the end of the negotiations.

²World Bank, 1982, 72.

Government rather than to Bougainvilleans.

The landowners' grievances were the degree of compulsion used by the government to acquire the land for the mine, the presence of thousands of migrant workers, the ugly destruction of the countryside caused by the mine and tailings area, the death of fish in the rivers and flying foxes (a delicacy) on land, the lack of land to inherit, and many young people feeling that they were not getting a fair share of the compensation payments being made to their elders since the mine began in 1972.

Economically, the mine has had its ups and downs. In 1980, the Prime Minister, Michael Somare, predicted that Papua New Guinea's dependence on foreign aid would reduce from 30% of the budget to 12% by 1990.³ But when in the mid-1980s the percentage of copper in the ore dropped lower than predicted and world prices for copper also dropped, the income to the Government dropped dramatically.⁴ Still, over the period 1972-1988, the copper mine brought in 17% of total revenue and 40% of export income and it was still crucial to the country's economy.

By 1988 a new younger group of militant landowners led by Francis Ona, a former BCL employee, and a former Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) army lieutenant, explosives expert Sam Kauona, felt so aggrieved about these issues that they began waging war against BCL by blowing up power pylons. They later fought against the government. The women were vocal too. "Land is marriage - land is history - land is everything. If our land is ruined, our life is finished," said Perpetua Serero, spokeswoman for the Panguna Landowners Association (PLA).⁵

The government's response to the acts of sabotage was to send in the police and, later, the army. But they proved ineffective against the guerilla tactics employed by the militants who called themselves the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). The mine was closed briefly in December 1988 and a curfew declared. In March 1989, a Bougainvillean woman was killed by migrant workers, two mainlanders were killed in pay-back and some soldiers were killed in an ambush.⁶

The BRA had three main demands: Kina 10 billion (about NZ\$16 billion) in compensation from BCL, 50% of all mining profits, applicable retrospectively, to come to the landowners, and the withdrawal of security forces.⁷ The Government rejected outright Ona's demands. But some of the security forces assaulted Premier Kabui and a cabinet minister who was blinded in one eye, burnt down permanent dwellings, pillaged property and raped women. This

³Statement by the Prime Minister, Rt. Hon. Michael Somare, 4 March 1980. The National Public Expenditure Plan revised this figure a few months' later to 18%.

⁴R. Goodman *et al*, The Economy of Papua New Guinea: An Independent Review, 139.

⁵*Post-Courier*, 1 May 1989.

⁶R. May, "Papua New Guinea's Bougainville Crisis", *The Pacific Review*, 174.

⁷Letter from Francis Ona published in *Nuigini News*, 12 April 1989.

caused many Bougainvilleans who had not previously sided with the BRA to join them. But they too wreaked violence. In May 1989, the mine was forced to close permanently. On 26 June 1989 a state of emergency was declared on Bougainville.⁸

Through 1989, the Government, the churches and private individuals tried several peace initiatives. One reason for their failure was the Government's misunderstanding the real issue. They treated it as a law and order issue, but gradually realised it was more a secessionist one. The Premier of North Solomons Province (NSP), Joseph Kabui, was in the difficult position of representing the Government officially, but supporting the aims of the BRA privately.⁹

Another reason for the Government's failure to solve the crisis was its lack of unity over the best way to deal with it. They oscillated between those wanting to crush the BRA militarily and those favouring negotiations. The Government also underestimated the influence of religious leaders whose belief in liberation theology equated liberation from sin with political liberation. Narokobi, himself a Catholic, understood this influence only recently.¹⁰ Bougainvillean Catholic Bishop Singkai was in the forefront of the UDI in 1975, and, along with Bishop Zale of the United Church, took a ministerial post in the Interim Government in 1990.

A "peace package" was worked out by the provincial and national governments and representatives of the landowners., increasing compensation and development funds to both landowners and the provincial government. The militants, however, rejected it. Then a committee of the Provincial Government, led by John Bika, visited villages throughout the province assessing people's opinions on their future political status. Late in 1989, the committee recommended full autonomy, except for defence, currency and foreign affairs. On the eve of an agreement to be signed by the provincial and national governments, Bika was shot dead by the BRA at his home in front of his wife and children.

In January 1990 the Government was forced to make a 25% cut in national government expenditures and to devalue the currency by 10%, and its patience with Bougainville ran out. On 4 January, Prime Minister Namaliu announced it had ceased all attempts at peaceful negotiations with the militants on Bougainville and was adopting an all-military option. The State of Emergency was extended.¹¹

An international peace negotiator, Professor Wallenstein of Sweden, was accepted by both sides and managed to persuade the BRA to lay down their arms in exchange for the Government withdrawing security forces. Both sides

⁸David Robie, "Bougainville One Year Later", *Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1989, 10-18.

⁹*Post-Courier*, 20 February 1989.

¹⁰Bernard Narokobi, speaking on Radio Australia, 15 August 1990. See Appendix 5.

¹¹*Pacific Islands Monthly*, February 1990, 12..

agreed to hold talks. The police and soldiers withdrew leaving the island in the control of the BRA.

Finding a secure venue for the talks proved difficult. During the delay, Francis Ona proclaimed a Unilateral Declaration of Independence on 17 May 1990 and announced the formation of an 'Interim Government of the Republic of Bougainville', chaired by the former Premier, Joseph Kabui. The ^{PNG} government immediately cut off communications and placed an economic blockade around the island. The next weeks saw the closure of hospitals, shops, banks, schools, shipping and air transport. Soon there were no phones, electricity, oil or petrol, and the provincial government disbanded.

In July, the New Zealand government announced that an offer of three navy ships to facilitate the talks taking place had been accepted by both sides. The talks began on 29 July. The Bougainvilleans refused to shake hands with anyone or eat the ship's food, but when Somare and Kabui, self-styled "Minister for Peace, Justice and Police in the Interim Government of the Republic of Bougainville", made their opening addresses, both stressed the need for finding unity and restoring services. This note surprised many, and set the tone for the subsequent talks.¹² It came about as a result of a meeting the previous evening on board the frigate *HMNZS Wellington*, when the Government negotiators, led by Somare and Bernard Narokobi, Attorney General and Minister for Justice, together with a small press contingent, reviewed the situation and the approach they would take. Narokobi introduced three extra people, Alan Weeks and Mohan Bhagwandadas of Melbourne, and this writer, as his "spiritual advisers". All three had spent years in Papua New Guinea working with Moral Re-Armament (MRA), going back to 1967, and had helped bring about reconciliation during earlier crises on Bougainville.¹³ The evening included a Bible reading and prayers, finishing with Sir Michael Somare saying the Prayer of St. Francis.¹⁴

Religion was to play an important part in the negotiations. Each day's session began with a short service, led by the ship's chaplain. Both sides prayed for God's leading in the negotiations. But the promise of the opening day was followed by frustration the next day as Kabui and his team of 20 fearful, bitter people outlined all the atrocities the army and police had committed and said UDI was not negotiable.¹⁵ Bishop Singkai titled his address, 'Additional sting for Papua New Guinea from Bishop Gregory Singkai' and he claimed to represent the 80% of the island's population who were Catholics and said they wanted nothing more to do with Papua New Guinea.

¹²For the text of Somare's address, see Appendix 3.

¹³See the author's "The Resolution of the Bougainville Copper Land Crisis of 1969". Narokobi had met MRA as a young lawyer in the 1970s. He opened an MRA conference in Sydney in December 1989 where he appealed for help on the Bougainville crisis. In June 1990 he invited MRA people to go to Papua New Guinea. A few days after the bookings had been made for 20 July, the NZ government announced its offer to facilitate the talks taking place, starting late in July.

¹⁴For a list of those present, see Appendix 1.

¹⁵For a list of the negotiators, see Appendix 2.

Somare and Narokobi listened patiently to the Bougainvilleans' attacks, then acknowledged wrongs committed and offered to bring an international commission of jurists to investigate atrocities, promising to pay compensation where the security forces were at fault. They agreed on the need to restore services, and to continue dialogue. They said that the important thing on Bougainville was not the copper but the people, who had contributed a great deal to PNG. They expressed the need for forgiveness and reconciliation.

It became apparent as the days wore on that the Bougainvilleans thought they had won the war against the constitution, and that the Government was honour bound to recognise UDI, pay compensation, pay to set up a public service on Bougainville, and pay for much else.¹⁶ Somare and Narokobi rejected these demands outright. They explained that the Provincial Government already had far greater powers in the present constitution than the Bougainvilleans were implementing.¹⁷

Several Bougainvilleans kept insisting on independence, others pleading for peace, still others wanting the return of services first and foremost. They kept pleading for recognition of UDI and the lifting of the blockade. Their position was influenced by Kauona and Ona, to whom they were reporting back on land each night. Ona's aunt, Cecelia Gemel, was one of the negotiators.

The government's argument was that UDI was unacceptable because it was unconstitutional and claimed through violence. They said that the reason no-one was coming to the island was not because of the blockade but because of their fear of the armed young men of the BRA. They promised to work for change in the constitution but only if the process was legal, peaceful and wanted by a clear majority. To some of the Bougainvilleans, this was acceptable, but not to others. An agreement was reached by lawyers on both sides to a Memorandum of Understanding, but at the last moment James Singko, the BRA representative, refused to sign, insisting on independence being granted first. The talks almost broke down, but it was agreed that a final attempt would be made on Sunday 5 August.

The Bougainvilleans returned to the theme of independence before agreement. Somare said that no country had recognised their UDI, and none would. The two perspectives seemed irreconcilable. When James Singko spoke of their black skins being the unifying factor, Narokobi, with great compassion, said, "James, my friend James, your vision is far too small. You will never, never build a nation on the basis of one colour. It is far too small an aim. What about the 'redskins' on the island? You have 'whiteskins' too. If blackness is the basis of your unity, you will divide the whole island." The atmosphere was electric. Singko was silent. Sir Michael called for a short break.

The turning point happened during that break when Narokobi prayed and meditated, then wrote down four points:

- 1) Restore services everywhere as soon as possible;

¹⁶For the full list of demands, see appendix 4.

¹⁷See Pacific Constitutions.

2) The government to recognise this group of 20 'Bougainville Negotiators' as the official representatives;

3) The responsibility for security would rest with the Bougainville Negotiators, and if there is any breach, the services from that area would be withdrawn;

4) Lay aside all political statements about the island's future until the next round of talks which should take place at a venue to be decided in 6-8 weeks' time.

When the Bougainvilleans returned, still disunited, they were surprised at the offers, and accepted immediately. UDI was deferred, not suspended. Other previously agreed points were added. The international observers from New Zealand, Canada and Vanuatu helped with the final wording¹⁸ and the *Endeavour Accord* was agreed to and signed. Both sides won, no-one lost.

There were very emotional scenes afterwards - handshakes, hugs, speeches of gratitude. "This is a miracle," Kabui said. "At last we have peace," said a tearful Cecelia Gemel. "God helped us find a good breakthrough. it helped avert civil war," said Narokobi. "What we achieved was the impossible. This miracle shows that Jesus Christ was working through us," James Singko said. "This is the true role of the navy - not to wage war but to keep the peace," said Commodore Ian Hunter while announcing the New Zealand government's offer of the ships again if needed.

The unexpected component in the apparent reconciliation was the religious outlook of both sides, eg the prayers and Bible readings on the themes of reconciliation and making covenants, which began the daily sessions of the talks; the periods of quiet reflection, and later sharing of thoughts, on board the *Wellington*, and the desperate need for a solution felt by both sides.¹⁹

The future political status of Bougainville is to be discussed in the next round of talks, due in early October. The resolution of this issue could take some time. After three weeks of preparation, three boat-loads of public servants, nurses and extension officers and goods went to Bougainville in the last week of August, but they were turned away from the island because 70 soldiers and 30 police accompanied those administering the return of the services. The Bougainvilleans saw this as a breach of trust, the Government as necessary manpower for administering the return of the services. The spirit created on the *Endeavour*, if it can be continued, should enable the services to be restored and the negotiators to come to a solution acceptable to both sides and the world at large.

¹⁸ *The Press*, Christchurch, 17 September 1990.

¹⁹ MRA's presence was another factor noted by *Time* magazine, *Post-Courier*, the *Islands Business Review*, Radio Australia and the BBC World Service. See Appendix 6. Both negotiating teams had also viewed MRA videos. The MRA group were the only ones invited by the Bougainvilleans to share their lunch in their wardroom.

Bibliography

- Goodman, R, Lepani, C, and Morawetz, D
The Economy of Papua New Guinea: An Independent Review, Development Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1985.
- May, R "Papua New Guinea's Bougainville Crisis", The Pacific Review, vol 3, no. 2, 1990.
- National Public Expenditure Plans, 1978-80, Papua New Guinea Government.
- Pacific Constitutions, Vol. 2, The Independent States of Melanesia and Micronesia - Papua New Guinea, USP Pacific Law Unit, and the Institute of Pacific Studies, Suva, 1983.
- Papua New Guinea: Selected Development Issues, World Bank, USA, 1982.
- Robie, D "Bougainville One Year Later", *Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1989.
- Senge, F "Counting the Losses in a State of War", Pacific Islands Monthly, Feb. 1990.