

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

"The Chief" Wins an Accord

Somare stalls rebel islanders in their thrust for independence

By ROWAN CALLICK PORT MORESBY

Sir Michael Somare's first miracle was to pull together peoples of many cultures and more than 700 languages into a single nation, Papua New Guinea, of which he was Prime Minister through eight of its vital first ten years.

Many observers had believed that, at 52, a venerable age in PNG, Somare was past the age of miracles. But last week he pulled off another remarkable feat, again against fearful odds: he persuaded the rebels of Bougainville island to defer their claim for separate nationhood in exchange for the lifting of a government blockade that had progressively severed communication, medical, education and other services to the island since its unilateral declaration of independence on May 17.

Somare—widely known as "The Chief," reflecting his traditional status as *sana* or head of his people—became Foreign Minister two years ago. Since then he has tended to allow his attention to be diverted from often-raucous domestic affairs, making frequent private overseas trips, especially to East Asia, where funds were raised for the Pangu Party's investment in an office block to be named Somare House. After 22 years in parliament, Somare had stepped down as the leader of Pangu, which he founded, and appeared to have lost some of his zest. With his face on the new 50-kina banknote, he was acquiring elder-statesman status.

When he and Justice Minister Bernard Narokobi were nominated by the Bougainville rebels as the acceptable leaders of a government negotiating team, it was seen as a last great test for the father of the nation. Did he still have the ability to win consensus the "Melanesian way" in the face of the most violent conflict (more than 100 killed) in the South Pacific since the Pacific War?

The talks, which began on July 29, took place on the 12,000-tonne supply tanker HMNZS *Endeavour*, one of three New Zealand naval vessels that had sailed to Bougainville to provide a secure, neutral venue. At first, both sides were taken to *Endeavour* by helicopter, but as talks progressed the *Endeavour* and frigates *Waikato* and *Wellington* moved steadily to-

gether, and closer to the coast, so that ultimately they could anchor. The delegation of 21 Bougainvilleans returned at nightfall to the island, where they consulted with Bougainville Revolutionary Army president Francis Ona.

Every day the discussions began with prayers: the Bougainville team, led by provincial Premier Joseph Kabui, included Catholic and United Church bishops and a Seventh Day Adventist minister; Narokobi, a civil rights lawyer and an ardent Catholic layman, had also invited on board a team of three from the Moral Re-Armament movement. Narokobi had for



Somare returns to Port Moresby: victory for the "Melanesian way"

weeks kept contact with the rebels, flying to Kavieng on New Ireland, to speak to them via the Catholic church's radio schedule. When the surprise breakthrough came, on Sunday afternoon, Aug. 5, BRA vice president James Singko, a plantation owner, attributed it to the intercession of Jesus Christ.

In between, however, harsh words were spoken. The Bougainvillians, 11 in succession, delivered a litany of complaints of abuses by government troops—withdrawn in March—while admitting none on their side. Somare and Narokobi bit their tongues, and replied by agreeing to invite the International Commission of Jurists to investigate. Narokobi added the well-understood metaphor that sending in the PNG army had been akin to setting a dog off a leash: it had become hard to control. They warned, when the talks were bogged down, that if they failed, the central government would have to mount a renewed military assault on the island, which would be tantamount to civil war.

Somare stressed the two points on which both sides agreed: that they should keep talking and that services should be restored. The issue of Bougainville Copper's giant Panguna mine, closed 15 months ago, was hardly raised. This, and the effective expulsion of almost all non-Bougainvilleans while government services are restored, have provided the BRA with two major victories. The talks are due to reconvene to consider political accommodations on Sept. 24, when Somare, *sana*-style, has invited the negotiators to his village in the Murik Lakes area of the East Sepik province, 1,500 kilometers away.

Major constitutional amendments will be required if PNG is to fulfill the minimum Bougainvillean expectations of statehood falling just short of independence, with Port Moresby still running foreign affairs and defense.

One of the big remaining questions is whether the so-called Endeavour Accord can be made to stick among the BRA's ill-disciplined young soldiers, still smitten by the apparent success of their campaign and with their sense of reality blurred by cargo-cult concepts. Reports of ritual executions, rape and pillage on the island since the blockade was enforced, however, appear to have been, in part, misinformation. Prime Minister Rabbie Namaliu and his deputy, Ted Diro, had given lurid accounts of the "execution" of the Bougainville Cocoa Board chairman James Rutana and seven others—

yet Rutana turned up at the peace talks looking surprisingly robust. He said that the reported deaths of his colleagues, Gerard Sinato, Deputy Premier of Bougainville province, and former M.P. Anthony Anugu, were similarly exaggerated. Yet BRA soldiers may not accept the compromises of their leaders at the talks. "We'll need a lot of glue," said a senior member of the Prime Minister's staff.

What now for Somare? Will he end his political career on this high note of success and be elected president of the United Nations General Assembly for a year from September next year; or will he return to contest another election, due in mid-1992? His return to Port Moresby last Tuesday night was triumphant. Cecilia Kenevi, leader of a group of Bougainvillean women who performed a welcoming song and dance, wept as she presented him with a lei. Teaching services commissioner Gordon Manis told the bouyant Somare: "Once again, you have demonstrated to all of us, to our nation, that you can do it." ■