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19 June, 2007

Sir Michael Somare
Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea

Dear Sir Michael,

I heard yesterday that our friend Bernard Narokobi's wife is very ill, and that they are flying back to PNG in two days' time. I am flying to Wellington today to visit them before they leave. They have served your country well in NZ, and been good friends of Initiatives of Change (formerly MRA) over a long period.

Bernard and I have discussed those historic days in 1990 which you, Bernard, Alan, Mohan and I were all part of. Bernard and I have both found it hard to recall the details. However, I have unearthed a letter I wrote in 1990, immediately after I returned from Bougainville and the Peace Talks on board the *HMNZS Endeavour*. And also an essay I wrote for university.

I am giving Bernard a copy of both, and also thought you might like a copy, because they capture a piece of history that may not be recorded elsewhere. I hope you can put them into the Parliamentary Library, or a suitable institution, for people to study in the future.

I also enclose for the Parliamentary Library a copy of my original booklet on Bougainville, which again captures a slice of PNG history from a perspective different to most historians'.

I am aware that much has happened in the last 17 years. I am grateful that a new start has been made in the island, and pray that peace will continue and a way ahead found that benefits the whole country. It is a delicate task you have leading it.

With best wishes,



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19 September 1990

You may have heard of the recent visit to Papua New Guinea by Alan Weeks and Mohan Bhagwandas of Melbourne, and myself. We responded to an invitation in June from Bernard Narokobi, Attorney General, to go to PNG. Bernard met Moral Re-Armament as a young lawyer in the 1970s. Alan Weeks got to know him well at that time and has kept in touch since. Bernard opened an MRA conference in Sydney last December. There he revealed his anguish of heart over Bougainville, an outer island of Papua New Guinea, where a 20 months' war with over 100 deaths had caused great bitterness. One of the world's largest copper mines had been forced to close down. Talks were due between the Papua New Guinea Government and the Bougainville "rebels" whose unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) on 17 May this year had caused the government to withdraw all services to the island. The population of 160,000 were suffering from no hospitals, phones, electricity, petrol, shops, banks, schools, shipping, air transport or provincial government. Bernard asked for help.

In April he was in Christchurch for a Commonwealth Law Ministers' Conference, and spent an evening in our home with some university staff and their wives. Again he reiterated the need for help. His letter arriving in June triggered our response. A few days after we made our bookings for 20 July, the NZ government announced its offer of three navy ships to facilitate the talks taking place - starting late in July!

On 27 July we were asked, at two hour's notice, to fly to Rabaul to join the negotiators on board the frigate *HMNZS Wellington*. You can imagine our feelings! But right from the start we felt God's spirit at work. It was evident in the first evening with the negotiators and reporters, when Bernard asked us to tell of our friendships built in PNG over 23 years, and our helping bring about reconciliation during earlier crises on Bougainville. The evening included a Bible reading and prayers, finishing with Sir Michael Somare, the Foreign Minister, leading us all in saying the Prayer of St. Francis. The meeting set the tone for the subsequent talks.

The talks began on Sunday 29 July. We were flown in threes in a doorless helicopter to *HMNZS Endeavour*. I shall never forget the fear and bitterness in the eyes of the 20 hard-faced Bougainvilleans as they entered the negotiating wardroom. Some refused to shake hands with anyone or eat the ship's food. They had white stickers on their necks which caused misgivings in the government side. They turned out to be a slow-release sea-sickness treatment given by the ship's doctor!

The ice was broken by a spirited church service led by the ship's chaplain. Both sides prayed for God's leading in the negotiations. We left the room after that, and Sir Michael and Joseph Kabui made their opening addresses. Both stressed the need for finding unity and restoring services. Sir Michael acknowledged wrongs committed and focussed on the needs of the people of Bougainville, and on reconciliation and forgiveness. Unknown to us, two of the government support staff had worked until the small hours after the introductory evening on this remarkable speech. Afterwards, Alan, Mohan and I met Kabui out on deck. He welcomed us and introduced us to his colleagues saying that MRA had played an important part in Bougainville in the past.

The next day, Kabui and his team outlined all the atrocities the army and police had committed and said UDI was not negotiable. "Lift the blockade," they pleaded. Somare and Narokobi simply listened.

That day, Kabui invited us three to share their food over lunch, and we had a chance to speak and answer questions with all the Bougainville group. A bridge was built and from then on we were able to talk with them in their quarters on board. They weren't eating the ship's food because they reported back each night on land and didn't want to be seen to be enjoying luxury while their people suffered.

Each day's session began with a short service, and we were able to contribute during prayers. Both sides wanted the restoration of government services and further talks to be held, but it became apparent as the days wore on that the Bougainvilleans would not budge on their UDI. The government could not accept this because it was unconstitutional. They said that the important thing on Bougainville was not the copper but the people, who had contributed a great deal to PNG. They offered to bring an international commission of jurists to investigate atrocities, promising to pay compensation where they were at fault. They promised to work for change in the constitution but only if the process was legal, peaceful and wanted by a clear majority.

On Friday, agreement was reached by lawyers on both sides to a Memorandum of Understanding, but at the last moment James Singko, the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) representative, refused to sign, insisting on independence being granted first. Narokobi and Somare were exasperated beyond endurance and said they would leave for Rabaul immediately. Then Paul Bengo, Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, quietly but firmly intervened and appealed to Somare as "Father of the Nation" to stay and help find a new way. He agreed. The Bougainvilleans were given one hour to decide. When they returned, Kabui said, "I am in a very dangerous position. Could I talk with our people tomorrow and come back on Sunday?" Somare agreed.

On Sunday 5th August, in my early morning quiet time, I felt sure that God would not let down the faith of many people who were praying for peace. The clear thought came, "There will be unity today", but humanly it seemed unlikely. Up on deck, I saw a beautiful rainbow. Then when the Bougainvilleans arrived, two of them shook my hand! Good omens.

Finally, the talks began. Sir Michael explained that the reason no-one was coming to the island was not because of the 'blockade' but because of their fear of the young men of the BRA, who stalked the land with rifles. Then he announced that medical supplies were being ferried in by helicopter even if they could not agree. This helped a lot. But the Bougainvilleans were disunited, several again insisting on independence, and there was deadlock. 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 break and return for the final session.

In that break, Bernard prayed, and listened to God. He wrote down four points:

- 1) Restore services everywhere as soon as possible;
- 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 that if there is any breach, withdraw the services from that area;

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 amazed at the offers, and accepted immediately. UDI was deferred, not suspended. Other previously agreed points were added and the *Endeavour Accord* was agreed to and signed. Both sides won, no-one lost.

We shall never forget the emotional scenes afterwards - handshakes, hugs, speeches of gratitude. "This is a miracle," Kabui said. "Jesus Christ was with us," James Singko said. "At last we have peace," said a tearful Cecelia Gemel, aunt to the BRA leader, Francis Ona. "This is the true role of the navy - not to wage war but to keep the peace," said Commodore Ian Hunter while announcing our government's offer of the ships again if needed.

On our way back to Rabaul that night, we sang hymns. All knew that God was very real, and a loving Father of all people.

Now we need to pray for the wisdom of leaders on both sides. Sadly, two weeks ago, three boat-loads of people and goods were turned away from the island because 70 soldiers and 30 police accompanied the nurses and public servants. The Bougainvilleans saw this as a breach of trust, the Government as necessary manpower for administering the return of the services.

This whole experience has highlighted for me that ordinary people can be used by God to help answer problems, small or large. Also that man's extremity is God's opportunity. All negotiators felt in great need. Human wisdom had failed. Yet a new pathway was found. Perhaps our preparation for the future should be for each of us to 'build bridges' right where we are.

It was a rare privilege to be involved in these talks. MRA's participation was noted by *Time* magazine, the *Islands Business Review*, and the *Post Courier*, as well as being reported on Radio Australia and the BBC World Service. The next talks are due early in October.

Yours sincerely,

Nigel Cooper