

## Dialogue

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### *Perspectives on the Crisis*

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## *Bougainville: A Matter of Attitude*

*Father Bob Wiley*

As far as I am concerned the Bougainville Crisis began in the mid-1960s. Out of nowhere men appeared ready to prospect, build roads, and change the life of the people of Bougainville. From the beginning there was opposition. Nothing was really explained to the people. These people move more slowly than the people of more “developed” or “civilized” nations, which does not mean that they are wrong to do so. Here we had a people of the Stone Age thrown into the Jet Age, causing tremendous trauma for all of those concerned.

They were told by the government that gold and silver belonged to the Crown, whereas their tradition was that the people owned everything on top of the ground and under the ground. Strangers disrupted their privacy by invading their land without explanation, or with a very poor explanation. Markers and camps were disrupted, so no one can say there was not opposition from the beginning.

Things moved along, and prospecting and road building continued. Company people came to see me continually. I was told that with what they were finding they would be here a long time. Yet we kept hearing on the radio that Conzinc Riotinto Zinc of Australia (CRA) was not sure about the feasibility of the project. Deception was part of the game.

Right from the beginning we see CRA responding to the person who began it all—Oni. Overlooking the land from the mountains of Deomori area he told the company that this was all his land and they could do what they liked. We tried to tell the men from the company that no one man owns the land and cannot give permission by himself. Even the local government officer thought that the company was being foolish and should have consulted him about custom and law.

The company dealt arrogantly with the people. They had no intention of stopping. Some company officials told me that they were concerned about what was going on, that the people were not receiving any compen-

sation. But they said they could not do anything if Canberra and CRA made a deal. The local government officer said practically the same thing. The minister for Territories, Mr Barnes, came and talked to the people at Pakia village. He told the people they would get nothing, and only made things worse.

The old big man of Guava, the blind Nakari, never changed his mind about being against mining. He remembers people being "kalboosed" (jailed), or forced to cut bush in the hot sun, by local government officials for refusing to sign the agreement. The names of these officials were burned into their memories. One of these gentlemen was brought in from Melbourne as a consultant in the late 1980s, and was shot and wounded the next day. The people remembered him.

The company used certain local people as consultants, even if they were the biggest rascals going. Some got quite wealthy, moved further and further from their people, and basked in the new country club style.

In August 1987 landowners had a meeting at Panguna with the objective of changing the old executive of the Landowners' Association, which had been playing musical chairs with positions. The people voted 98 to 12 to oust the old executive and elect a new one. The old members ran in the election but lost. Of course they were bitter and resented their loss. No new association was formed, as has been claimed. Yet the company refused to recognize the new executive, preferring to stick with their old reliables.

For one year the new executive attempted to meet with the company, but was ignored. When I saw Francis Ona in October 1988, he told me that he was taking a holiday, going to the village to do some work. A month later the violence erupted. I told the general manager of the company in January 1990 that I saw no way around the impasse of secession, and that they had let things drag on too long. They should have recognized the new executive and talked with them. Now the powerless have power, and the have-nots have become haves. They had weapons and could bring a huge mining company to its knees and humiliate a government and its military.

During the time of the violence I asked the women of Moroni, Guava, and other villages what they thought about the situation and what they wanted. They all responded that they wanted no more mining, they wanted the land back, and for everyone to get out. They wondered what would happen to their children.

Much deception went on in this whole venture. Just look at the way the helicopters were used as gunships and to dump bodies of innocent people into the ocean. We knew this was going on, but people lied. Now they look for scapegoats and a quick solution. But the Melanesian way involves slow plodding through long meetings.

I predicted in the mid-1960s that one day the situation would erupt because the people were being forced to accept something they did not want. On one occasion, I told some CRA bigwigs that the old people could not stop them if they pushed the project through. Then I pointed to the schoolchildren and told them that this was where the trouble would come from. Twenty years later it came true. The leaders and commanders came from those young boys who turned into men. They did not forget.