

Dialogue

Perspectives on the Crisis

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The Bougainville Revolutionary Army

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The current situation on Bougainville has arisen from the repeated failure of the government of Papua New Guinea to enter into meaningful negotiations in good faith with the people of Bougainville. This situation continues to this day. Despite the agreement between Papua New Guinea and Bougainville that the Commonwealth Secretariat will facilitate negotiations and organize a multinational peacekeeping force, Papua New Guinea fails to communicate with that body toward negotiations.

Originally the conflict was a localized business dispute over the mining agreement between the Panguna landowners and Bougainville Copper Limited backed by the Papua New Guinea government. The original terms of the agreement had been set in 1967 during the colonial administration of Papua New Guinea by Australia.

The landowners and the North Solomons Provincial Government were watching the terms of the new mining agreements being negotiated at Ok Tedi and Porgera on the PNG mainland. These were offering far more benefits to the provinces and the landowners than had ever been considered for Bougainville.

The landowners were concerned about the vast destruction of the ecosystem that was taking place as a result of the mining. Their concern was aggravated when they discovered that some of the chemicals in use at the mine were prohibited throughout the world.

The scope of the Panguna mine has to be seen to be believed. It is a tribute to human ingenuity that people are capable not only of moving a mountain but of excavating such an immense basin as well. One stands in awe at the rim and looks across a vast crater to the other side. Giant trucks appear as tiny toys on the mine floor. What the landowners see is that their land has virtually disappeared.

What do they have to replace this great loss? They were forced from

this land in 1967. They are now supposedly independent and free people and this vast hole is a hole in the heart of each and every one of them.

When last on the island I visited Guava village in the steep ranges behind the mine, home of Francis Ona. The track is steep and narrow, for four-wheel-drive vehicles only, a track constructed, not by the mine to service the village people to whom the mine owed so much, but for the defense force to use in the battle against the protesters.

The village is leveled, not a house remains, just a small church at one end, which is surrounded by beautiful and rare flowers and fruit trees. Standing in the middle of that space it is not difficult to imagine the sound of children playing, to smell the perfume of the citrus, and to hear the throb of helicopters climbing through the valley intent on destruction.

In 1989, when it appeared that all requests for renegotiation by the landowners were falling on deaf ears, Francis Ona declared that they would close the mine until the matter was negotiated. The closure was achieved relatively easily. With a few men and some explosives they felled one of the main pylons bringing power to the mine from Loloho and threatened to continue these actions until the case was heard. It was not Francis Ona's intention that human life would be endangered; rather, he acted because human life was in danger, because of poisoning from the mine and the inadequate assurance for the future of the landowners, who now own just a huge hole in the ground.

Papua New Guinea's response was violent oppression of the people. Francis Ona was hunted like a dog, curfews were imposed, and under a state of emergency all of Bougainville's constitutional rights were withdrawn, including the right of assembly. It became clear that the island was considered little more than a cash supply for the national government.

The few men of the power-pylon days grew in number with the intensity of the human rights violations committed by the defense force. As the defense force destroyed villages they fed the ranks of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, which became the new home of the youth from destroyed villages.

A peace package, which looked attractive to many, was offered to the landowners and the provincial government. The Tinuputz Peace Committee objected to the provincial government signing the package because Francis Ona was still in the bush and would not accept this solution without negotiation. It was suggested to the national and provincial governments that a peace *agreement* should be the priority; after an end to the

fighting the development package could be discussed. At the heart of our suggestions were proposals that complete amnesty be given to Francis Ona and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army to allow them to attend the peace ceremony and that after the signing of the peace agreement the defense force would be withdrawn. The Papua New Guinea government liked the idea of the peace agreement but would not offer the amnesty, making the agreement meaningless.

The addition of Lieutenant Sam Kauona to Bougainville Revolutionary Army ranks meant the beginning of a more military and aggressive Bougainville Revolutionary Army. Conflict was now open but remained localized to the mining area. People in the northern and southern regions, although under state of emergency control, still felt that it was a problem to be faced by the mine landowners. This attitude began to change when the defense forces, trying unsuccessfully to identify members of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, began to take out their frustrations on all Bougainvilleans.

There has always been an underlying desire for separation from Papua New Guinea, and on the basis of this desire for autonomy Ona was able to enlist the full support of the people of Bougainville. When it was pointed out that the attitude adopted by the national government applied not only to the landowners but to all Bougainvilleans, and that the Bougainville Revolutionary Army was a force fighting for the rights of all the people, the movement spread like a brushfire throughout the island.

Before the mine, Bougainville was a peaceful and prosperous island controlled at the village level by a strong traditional system of justice. Bougainvilleans do not share the same culture as Papua New Guineans; they are a different people with different values. The past liaison with Papua New Guinea has caused serious moral and traditional breakdowns within their society. The youth were paying less and less respect to traditional values, declaring that village law was now subordinate to the police, who were the real power. These youths formed gangs of "rascals" over whom the elders had no control. All this might have been all right for a developing country, had the police been effective. However, the police chose to indulge themselves with alcohol, corruption, and inactivity. The police force on Bougainville was totally ineffective against crime.

The first to join the ranks of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army were these "rascal" youths. In a sense, they had been fighting the security forces for some years and had no respect whatsoever for the enemy. These "ras-

cal” youths easily convinced other more moral youths that their country needed them.

One of the great tragedies of the conflict is that Bougainville’s youth have been drawn into battle. There were no enlistment procedures for joining the Bougainville Revolutionary Army—one was either Bougainville Revolutionary Army or not. The decision rested with the individual and often was a result of peer pressure.

As in any armed conflict, there has been a profound change in all the youth throughout the country. The Bougainville Revolutionary Army fought and defeated an army equipped with modern weapons, technology, training, and Australian government support. The defenders had primitive weapons and outmoded and unreliable reconstructed World War II relics.

Bougainvilleans are Christians. The churches are part of everybody’s life because most of the education on Bougainville for the past century has been through the missions. Taking a young boy who has been taught all his life that to kill is a damning sin and instructing him to do just that presents a great moral danger.

When Papua New Guinea withdrew all police and military from Bougainville in March 1990 they effectively handed over power to the Bougainville Revolutionary Army. There have been reports of discontent with BRA activity since the evacuation, even to the extent of saying their behavior is no better than the defense force they have defeated. This lack of discipline resulted in the alienation of some of the leaders on Buka, which has since been reoccupied by the PNG government. Since those early days of near anarchy, the Interim Government has been formed, and under it the Bougainville Revolutionary Army has been organized into a purely military defensive unit. A separate police force and judiciary have been formed to handle matters of law and order.

Understanding how the situation of anarchy arose involves consideration of the youth as a group. Bougainville provided the realization of every teenager’s dream—rebels *with* a cause. They won the battle against authority. The fruits of this victory were manifold: they were in charge; they could drive any car that took their fancy—executive air-conditioned dream machines that were never going to be available to them in the normal course of their lives and four-wheel drives that their fathers had had to work twenty years for. They carried weapons and strolled the streets like cowboys in Dodge City. The moral code of the young Bougainville

Revolutionary Army was entirely at their discretion; the old code had been swept away by the conflict. Their every word was a command, and every soldier was a commander in his own right. This is the nature of a guerrilla force that is formed organically for the defense of people's rights, not organized politically as an aggressive rebel force aimed at the overthrow of a government.

The organization and control of these youths has been one of the great challenges to the leadership of the Interim Government. It is difficult to impose strict military chains of command on unpaid freedom fighters. The Bougainville Revolutionary Army is a necessity if the government is to defend the island against further attack from Papua New Guinea. It is not a necessity for law and order, as with the evacuation of PNG personnel the island has returned to a sophisticated form of village life.

However, the main challenge in the future will be to deal with the tremendous psychological changes that have taken place in the minds of these youths: to renew respect for authority, to alleviate the condition of the damned, to return to the Christian values of their teaching, to relieve them of the hate and aggression that has been built into their convictions, and to impose a democratic system of government.

The longer Bougainville is denied its rights—to self-determination, to communication, to productivity and development—and the longer it is kept under threat of invasion and subjugation by Papua New Guinea, the more serious and insoluble will this problem become—for the leaders, for the churches, for the civilians, and for these heroes of its struggle for independence.

It is time for all people of goodwill throughout the world to bring pressure to bear on the government of Papua New Guinea to end the criminal medieval siege, to once and for all end the colonial exploitation of Bougainville, and to recognize Bougainville's right to self-determination.

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