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Ulukalala Lavaka Ata

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# The Bougainville Crisis and PNG-Australia relations.

## **Abstract**

Extract:

On one hand, a growing Bougainvillean nationalism and a sense of separate identity and on the other, a sovereign Government defending its very legitimacy. Papua New Guinea (PNG) is not entirely unique in a world which is seeing the re-emergence of ethnicity in international relations.

## **Keywords**

international relations, political-military dimensions, Bougainville Crisis, government

## The Bougainville Crisis and PNG-Australia Relations.

By 'Ulukalala Lavaka Ata\*

'It is a feeling deep down in our hearts that Bougainville is totally different than PNG, geographically, culturally. It's been a separate place from time immemorial. Ever since God created the Universe, Bougainville has been separate, has been different.'

FORMER NORTH SOLOMONS PREMIER JOSEPH KABUI.  
17 MAY 1991.

'There is no historical basis for Bougainville as an independent nation. Bougainville, like any other Province, is a colonial creation for convenience of administration. There is no such tribe as Bougainville.'

PNG MINISTER OF JUSTICE BERNARD NARAKOBI.  
7 AUGUST 1991.<sup>1</sup>

Encapsulated within these two quotations is the crux of the problem on the island of Bougainville. On one hand, a growing Bougainvillean nationalism and a sense of separate identity and on the other, a sovereign Government defending its very legitimacy. Papua New Guinea (PNG) is not entirely unique in a world which is seeing the re-emergence of ethnicity in international relations. One only has to look at Bosnia in Europe, Rwanda in Africa, or New Caledonia and Fiji in the Pacific. However, the problem has further complicating dimensions. For example, the vast copper mine has certainly hastened social and economic change in Bougainville, not to mention the equally vast environmental degradation and land alienation that this has brought about.

Moreover, 'to Melanesians, land is "life", power and security'.<sup>2</sup> Every single Papua New Guinean is a landowner in one way or another, and the questions of land ownership and future development of the country's mineral resources hangs in balance. Indeed, the

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- 'Ulukalala Lavaka Ata has a Masters in Defence Studies and a Masters in International Relations. He is a Tongan with a particular interest in the international relations of the Asia-Pacific region.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Mathew Spriggs, *Alternative Prehistories for Bougainville: Regional, National, or Micronational*, The Contemporary Pacific, Vol. 4, No. 2, Fall 1992, p.269.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Polomka, *Bougainville: Perspectives on a Crisis*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, 1990, p.1.

conflict on Bougainville has implications for most of the Melanesian and Polynesian Pacific due to land having such a spiritual and cultural link to its inhabitants, above and beyond that normally felt by Europeans. What does this mean for the future development of natural resources such as mining and logging not only within PNG, but also in the wider Pacific where many countries have limited resource bases and growing population pressures?

Nevertheless this is but a drop in the ocean of the very real problems faced by many developing nations of which PNG is one. In international relations terms, the problem is one of the political fragmentation of a sovereign state versus the rights of an ethnic group to self-determination within their own homeland.<sup>3</sup> In PNG alone there are over eight hundred different language groups, nineteen of whom are contained within North Solomons (or previously Bougainville) Province.<sup>4</sup> At varying times, even before given its independence, there have been breakaway movements within PNG such as the Gazelle Peninsular, Papua, Trobriand Islands or the Highlands Liberation Front.<sup>5</sup> The problem is not therefore new to PNG. Furthermore, before Europeans ventured onto the scene, historically most Melanesian groups lived fairly isolated lives within their clan groupings, yet traded widely. These groups could be viewed as divided along linguistic, cultural, geographical, genetic or historic lines. Indeed, even maps as Mathew Spriggs illustrates can be drawn or redrawn according to which criteria one chooses and there can be cases made for both sides of an argument.<sup>6</sup>

This article will focus on the implications for PNG and Australia of the present crisis after stating the key arguments for the PNG Central Government and the breakaway province of Bougainville. It will also take into account the political-military dimension as this interface may add different insights into what is more widely known in the press. In many ways, a guerrilla war is a battle for information and therefore influences people's perceptions. However, in the final analysis even though this crisis has a military dimension, the PNG Central Government may have finally realised (like von Clausewitz and Sun Tzu)<sup>7</sup> the primacy of politics over war by now seeking a political solution within the current Lincoln cease-fire agreement.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, it is not merely enough to have the political will to achieve an aim, one must also possess the commensurate means to

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<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Lawson, *Ethnonationalist Dimensions of Internal Conflict: The Case of Bougainville Secessionism*, Australian National University Peace Research Centre Working Paper No.121, Canberra, 1992, pp.1-3.

<sup>4</sup> Naomi Sharp, *Bougainville: Blood on our Hands Australia's role in PNG's War*, AID WATCH, Woollahra, 1997, p.5.

<sup>5</sup> Don Woolford, *Papua New Guinea: Initiation and Independence*, University of Queensland Press, Dai Nippon Printing Co. (Hong Kong) Ltd., 1976, pp.185-188.

<sup>6</sup> Mathew Spriggs, *Alternative Prehistories for Bougainville: Regional, National or Micronational*, *The Contemporary Pacific*, Fall 1992, pp. 269-298.

<sup>7</sup> Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Sun Tzu, Clausewitz and Jomini*, Frank Cass, London, 1992, p.155.

<sup>8</sup> *The Lincoln Agreement on Peace, Security and Development* on Bougainville was signed on 22 January 1998 amongst which was a 'permanent and irrevocable' ceasefire to take effect on midnight 30 April 1998 with elections to be held before the end of this year. To date this agreement has been kept by both parties. Accessed on 14 March 1998 at [http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/spacific/png/png\\_linclon\\_summary.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/spacific/png/png_linclon_summary.html) .

achieve that end. If war is merely an extension of politics by other means, it is even more important to begin with clearly defined achievable political goals.

***The Key Issues:***

The threat to the Government of PNG may perhaps have been seen as two dimensional.<sup>9</sup> Firstly, the political challenge to the authority of the state and secondly the loss of a significant economic resource.<sup>10</sup> The long term hazard is the first as other resources like OK Tedi, Porgera, Misima, Mount Hagen and Gulf Province oil deposits amongst the more well known, progress onwards in their production and negate the economic threat in the medium to long term. One observer states that:

‘the most important conclusion to be drawn from the experience of 1989 and 1990 is that the Papua New Guinea economy is capable of absorbing major adverse shocks.’<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the Bougainville crisis has not stopped these projects, in fact their construction and production ‘is likely to lead to rapid growth in the economy during the rest of the 1990s’.<sup>12</sup> What this means for the future is that the national economy is becoming less dependant upon any one resource project. The sad case of hiring the Sandline mercenaries illustrates the fact that there were ample funds available to the PNG Government at a time of supposed financial austerity.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the movement against the central Government is by no means united, for example there are both separatists who demand a degree of autonomy within the existing state yet short of total independence,<sup>14</sup> and the hard core for whom nothing less than secession will suffice.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Terence Wesley-Smith, *Australia and New Zealand*, in K.R. Howe, Robert C. Kiste and Brij V. Lal (eds.), *The Pacific Islands in the Twentieth Century*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1994, pp.216-217.

<sup>10</sup> There seems to be some slight variations in figures. Don Carruthers, *Some Implications for Papua New Guinea of the Closure of the Bougainville Mine*, in Ron May and Mathew Spriggs (eds.), *The Bougainville Crisis*, Crawford House Press, Bathurst, 1990, p.38. In its seventeen years of production the mine represented; 45 per cent of PNG export income; 17 per cent of internally generated government revenue; and 12 per cent of the gross domestic product. Additionally, Allan Manning in his (MBA Thesis), *The Closure of Bougainville Copper Ltd’s Mine: – Lessons for the Mining Industry*, Victoria University of Technology, 1994, p. 5, states – the mine produced about 4 per cent of world copper production for over 20 per cent of PNG’s gross domestic product.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Elek, *Papua New Guinea: Economic recovery from the Bougainville crisis and prospects for the 1990s*, National Centre for Development Studies, Islands/Australia Working Paper No. 91/9, Australian National University, Canberra, 1991, p.7.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>13</sup> Initially thought to be USD\$28.9 million but now known to be far more substantial. *New force ‘not just for Bougainville’ says PNG*, by Robert Karniol, *Janes Defence Weekly*, 5 March 1997. USD\$36 million. *Gunships and bombs solve nothing*, *The National (PNG) Newspaper*, 17 March 1998. Accessed 31 March 1998, at <http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/campaigns/ef/efhtmls/bvupdate.html> .

<sup>14</sup> Sam Kauona is translated as accepting the Permanent Cease-fire Agreement which was signed 22 January 1998 in New Zealand (known as the Lincoln Agreement on Peace, Security and Development on Bougainville). Australian Broadcasting Commission, *Lateline News Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> April, 10:30 p.m.* Ben Kamada another top rebel has reconciled himself to the Government. *Top rebel calls for all parties to reconcile*, *The National (PNG) Newspaper*, 24 March, 1998. Accessed 31 March 1998, at <http://www.hrc.wmin.ac.uk/campaigns/ef/efhtmls/bvupdate.html> .

The claims of the separatist movement are politically based upon 'the self-determination doctrine as their natural right in the international moral order'.<sup>16</sup> However, the homogeneous state is not the international norm, as most states often contain more than two or three different ethnic identities. To take the divisions further may risk states becoming for example uneconomic entities, as arguably many Pacific micro-states already are. In contrast, some observers suggest that the main reason for the secessionist movement is economic, because the mine represented so much financial gain.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, some observers have attributed this as a major cause of the crisis because the landowners of the province wanted a larger share of the revenue.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, depending upon ones point of view the development of the mine is either the central issue of the crisis or a catalyst. As we shall see later, whether or not there is solid proof that Bougainville is indeed a separate linguistic, cultural, geographic, historic entity may be immaterial. The truth of the matter is that nationalist sentiment whether imaged or not, is a powerful force. Perhaps what may be axiomatic in the long term is that the separatist elements on Bougainville *believe* that they are different from the rest of PNG.

### *Recent Origins of the Crisis*

Beliefs can be very powerful motivation, especially in such a fragmentary and poorly integrated society such as PNG, which never really had the advantage of a unifying national experience.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the mine and the changes it brought about certainly gave the secessionists a *cause*. Furthermore, the case for Bougainville is somewhat easier to fathom, because of its geography as an island (physically isolated five hundred miles distant from Port Moresby), it is an easily identifiable entity. Additionally, this perception is reinforced by its history.<sup>20</sup> Politically, Bougainville was seized by Germany in the late nineteenth century as a source of indentured labour for their plantations in such places as Samoa. Both these colonies were given up to Australia and New Zealand respectively at the advent of the Great War. Bougainville became a mandated Australian territory and continued with the plantation economy the Germans initiated, until the Second World War came to the island in the form of the Japanese invasion of 1942. The resulting

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<sup>15</sup> Francis Ona has always been a hard liner. For example he has never attended any of the major talks including the Lincoln Agreement. Accessed 14 March 1998, at [http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/spacific/png/png\\_bg.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/spacific/png/png_bg.html). Additionally he is quoted by John Zale a Bougainville Interim Government Spokesman as saying in July 1996: 'There can be no ceasefires, no peace talks, no negotiations only independence'. Ron May, *The Situation on Bougainville*, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Lawson, p.4.

<sup>17</sup> D.S. Carruthers, *Some implications for Papua New Guinea of the closure of the Bougainville Copper Mine*, in May and Spriggs (eds.), *The Bougainville Crisis*, pp.31-33.

<sup>18</sup> Quodling, *Bougainville the Mine and the People*, The Centre for Independent Studies Limited, Australian Print Group, 1991, p.52.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Somare is quoted as saying 'There is no common enemy or issue to bind the people together...unless there is true feeling of nationalism, and something common for people to come together and fight for, we cannot get results.' In Alexander Mamak and Richard Bedford (eds.), *Bougainville Nationalism*, Bougainville Special Publication, No. 1, Christchurch, 1974, p.1.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Henningham, *The Security and Defence Environment*, in Stephen Henningham and Desmond Ball (eds.), *South Pacific Security: Issues and Perspectives*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 72, Australian National University, Canberra, 1991, pp.17-18.

evacuation of most Australians understandably left some resentment amongst the local population who at first welcomed the Japanese. However, their ill treatment increased as the war started to go badly for the Japanese with the latter's supplies being choked off by the Allied war effort. Once the island was recaptured it reverted to Australian administration at the end of the war. Before PNG independence the Central Government granted provincial government to Bougainville (27 November 1973) as a result of violent protests. Subsequently, fifteen days before Australia granted PNG independence (16 December 1975), North Solomons to denote ethnic affiliations away from PNG, had unilaterally declared independence. However, secessionist sentiments were only temporarily placated by the creation of a provincial government with special autonomous powers above that of other provinces. This was followed by unsuccessful representations to the United Nations by Father Momis.<sup>21</sup> Secessionist sentiments have seethed since, as PNG continues to reject them. What seems clear though, is a perception perhaps best exemplified by black skinned Bougainvilleans that they are united *against* red skinned non-Bougainvilleans.

This resentment has multiplied with the opening of large scale copper mining in the Panguna area in 1972, and central are their feelings for land despite the populations' linguistic differences. The words below convey these strong sentiments:

Land is our life, land is our physical life – food and sustenance. Land is our social life; it is marriage; it is status; it is security; it is politics; in fact, it is our only world. When you take our land, you cut away the very heart of our existence.<sup>22</sup>

During the 1960s copper deposits were discovered here on a large but low grade scale, necessitating extensive open cut strip-mining to make it economic. Due to Bougainville being an Australian mandated territory, Australian legal practice automatically became dominant without due regard for local customs and traditions.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, anything below the land surface, including minerals belonged to the National Government and not to the landowners. This was reflected in the matter of royalties, which certainly added to the list of grievances.<sup>24</sup> Bougainville member of parliament Paul Lapun unsuccessfully tried to increase landowners shares in 1966 with a forty per cent share of royalties to be allocated to the development of Bougainville Province. These in fact were moderate voices of protest compared to what was to follow, which emphasised that the people of Bougainville were 'not opposed to mining as such, but were upset by the lack of consultation and direct benefit being received by them'.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Quodling, pp.18-19.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>23</sup> Manning, p.8. See also Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade briefing notes on Bougainville. Accessed on 14 March 1998, at [http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/specific/png/png\\_bg.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/specific/png/png_bg.html).

<sup>24</sup> Stewart Firth, *Strategic and Nuclear Issues*, in Howe et al., *Tides of History*, p. 305. Until the mine closed in 1989 the central government got 63 per cent (of profits); the provincial government got 4.8 per cent and the landowners got 0.2 per cent.

<sup>25</sup> Manning, p.9.

There were other contributory factors that helped create feelings of unity against outsiders. For example, there were thousands of other Papua New Guineans who came to the island seeking economic advantages not only as BCL employees but working in support of the mine apart from squatters.<sup>26</sup> The later group often could find no jobs and needed to resort to crime to make ends meet, causing further resentment of non-Bougainvilleans. Incidents like the one in 1972 in Goroka province where two senior civil servants (Dr. Luke Rovin of Kieta and Mr. Peter Moini of Buin both from Bougainville) accidentally ran over a small girl and were subsequently killed on the spot by Highland villagers, served to reinforce local prejudices against the savageness of mainlander 'redskins'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed the jet black skin of Bougainvilleans has given them a very visual reminder of their different historical identity and thus unity *in opposition* to others.<sup>28</sup>

This resentment has deepened with the ecological damage from the mine. Although the mine contributed education, employment, revenue, services and infrastructure it also caused environmental, social and economic damage to the local peoples. Many villages and gardens had to be relocated to make way for the mine. Due to the nature of the mine large tracts of native forest had to be cleared, destroying local habitat for the wildlife which were part of the subsistence dietary requirements. The mine tailings had to be disposed of along the riverbanks of the Kawerong or washed in the Jaba rivers. Subsequently this resulted in changing the course of these rivers and poisoning the fish not to mention the water which became unfit for human consumption or crops.

In truth, some observers state that the 1987 dispute could perhaps be traced to this massive environmental damage. The formation of the Panguna Landowners Association (PLA) in 1979 was a direct result of the feelings of inadequate compensation for loss of crops, fishing and hunting grounds.<sup>29</sup> Due to lack of organisation and coordination, before this time there was little that landowners could achieve. Subsequently after the looting of the Panguna Supermarket the Company agreed to hear their grievances which resulted in a compensation agreement between Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) and the PLA.<sup>30</sup> The radicalisation of the PLA came about with the setting up of the Road Mine Tailings Lease Trust Fund (RMTLF) with the aim of establishing an investment agency for the benefit of all future landowners.<sup>31</sup> It would also provide basic services to landowners like water, education, health care and transportation. Unfortunately, dissatisfaction arose out of the now PLA administered RMTLF due to various reasons such as some office bearers only nominally occupying their positions (due to little education and a poor appreciation of their responsibilities). Additionally, the perception by landowners that the PLA were increasingly siding with BCL was further fuelled by their idea of the landowners demands being unrealistic.

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<sup>26</sup> James Griffin, *Bougainville is a Special Case*, in May and Spriggs (eds.), *The Bougainville Crisis*, p.9.

<sup>27</sup> Woolford, p.201.

<sup>28</sup> Moses Havini, *Perspectives*, in Peter Polomka, *Bougainville Perspectives on a Crisis*, p.18.

<sup>29</sup> Griffin, pp.10-11.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Okole, *The Politics of the Panguna Landowners' Organisation*, in May and Spriggs (eds.), *The Bougainville Crisis*, p.17.

<sup>31</sup> Quodling, pp.57-59.

In short there began to appear further divisions within the landowners between the minority younger more educated landowners and the majority who were older and generally less educated.<sup>32</sup> There seems some evidence that the subsequent formation of the 'new' PLA may have been politically motivated.<sup>33</sup> However this new group declared the appointment of a new board of directors and made increasingly more militant demands on the provincial government and BCL. There were various acts of sabotage against BCL in December 1988 and by the following month the national government had recognised the 'new' PLA. The abduction of Mathew Kove (a PLA executive and Francis Ona's uncle) shortly afterwards is symptomatic of the divisions within the increasingly militant PLA.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, this group is thought to have been instrumental in the formation of the hard core of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA).<sup>35</sup>

### *The Media*

It was to this group that the national Government effectively handed power when it took the decision to withdraw all services and military personnel from Bougainville province in 1990, following unsuccessful attempts to restore law and order with military assistance. Since this time there have been well documented cases of both PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) and BRA human rights violations including extra judicial killings, murder, rape and torture, to name but a few.<sup>36</sup> At the best of times the relationship between the military and the media is a complex one of dependence and antagonism.

It is often reiterated that truth is the first casualty in any war, and nowhere is this more crucial than in a guerrilla war where the battle is for the population's 'hearts and minds'. Media coverage and attempts to control it raise fundamental western liberal democratic values (inherited from Australia) which are reflected in PNG as a democratic country.<sup>37</sup> Australian press coverage of PNG even in peacetime tends towards being paternalistic and often emphasises the negative side of PNG society. As reporting from the front line became more dependant upon physical security, coverage tended to follow increasingly BRA lines with growing military excesses against the population. During this crisis, the press inside PNG perhaps proved more responsible than that within Australia. For example *The Australian* reports (perhaps the only truly national daily in Australia) slowly changed their image of the rebels as 'primitive tribesmen' to being militarily capable and

<sup>32</sup> Terence Wesley-Smith and Eugene Ogan, *Copper Class and Crisis*, The Contemporary Pacific, Fall 1992, p.259.

<sup>33</sup> Okole, pp.21-22.

<sup>34</sup> Ron May, *Political Implications of the Bougainville Crisis for Papua New Guinea*, in May and Spriggs (eds.), *The Bougainville Crisis*, p. 55.

<sup>35</sup> The existence of this organisation surfaced with the publication of a letter to the *Arawa Bulletin*, see Manning, p.24. Its formation was partly as a response to the destruction of the ecological system, see Mike Forster, *The Bougainville Revolutionary Army*, in The Contemporary Pacific, Fall 1992, pp.368-369.

<sup>36</sup> Marilyn Taleo Havini, *Compilation of Human Rights Abuses Against the People of Bougainville 1989-1995 Volume 1*, and *Volume 2, 1989-1996*, Bougainville Freedom Movement, Erkinville, 1995 and 1996 respectively.

<sup>37</sup> A matter Bill Hayden refers to in Peter R. Young (ed.), *Defence and the Media in Time of Limited War*, Frank Cass, London, 1992, p.9.

owning automatic weapons.<sup>38</sup> Its reporting was often blatantly biased and showed far more concern for Australian interests than a concern for explaining the basic issues at stake. Thus basically putting national needs before journalistic objectives, something perhaps one would expect of the press of a developing nation, not a seasoned democracy with a vibrant allegedly responsible media. In contrast, the *Times* tended to have more sympathetic coverage frequently printing BRA letters and often disclaiming government charges, like the claim that Francis Ona was dead.<sup>39</sup>

As other Governments have found to their disdain, successive PNG Central Governments have been frustrated in attempting to muzzle the media and its international reputation has undoubtedly suffered as a result.<sup>40</sup> The Government did not seem to realise that its attempts at censorship and gently compelling of the nationalistic rhetoric on the media caused much of its own loss of credibility. Censorship forced the media to go physically to Bougainville to research their stories as well as antagonising them perhaps into anti-government sentiment.<sup>41</sup> Internally the Government seems to be gaining the upper hand even though 'Radio Free Bougainville' provides a rebel voice and the Catholic owned press initially held BRA sympathies.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, due to institutional influences like the majority of the press being based in the capital, Port Moresby, the crisis was portrayed 'through Papua New Guinean, not Bougainvillean eyes'.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, it is now becoming technically more difficult to isolate totally any area from the press with the proliferation of modern communications systems like satellite telephones able to send digital data and therefore video images if one so desired.<sup>44</sup> In the same vein, internationally the secessionists are receiving more sympathetic coverage but little solid political support.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps the greatest risk associated with the press from an official and military point of view, is its influence upon morale. It is a military principal that one should as far as possible maintain high morale, so that both the public and the military are set on the same path of achieving a clear political and strategic direction without hindrance. Conversely, the utmost should be done to unhinge the enemy morale. Both parties increasingly realise that morale is highly dependant upon media portrayal and therefore the fiercely contested information battle. However the fundamental truth of the relationship between the media and the military remains unchanged. The essence of successful warfare is secrecy,<sup>46</sup> on the other hand the essence of successful journalism is publicity. The peacetime

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<sup>38</sup> Phillip Cass, *A comparison of the coverage of the Bougainville civil war in The Australian and the Times of PNG*, Australian Journalism Review, Vol.14 No.2, pp.83-84.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p.84.

<sup>40</sup> Ron May, *The Situation on Bougainville: Implications for Papua New Guinea, Australia and the Region*, Current Issues Brief No.9 1996-97, Parliamentary Research Service, Canberra, 1997, p.12.

<sup>41</sup> Suzzana Layton, *Fuzzy-Wuzzy Devils*, The Contemporary Pacific, Fall 1992, p.311.

<sup>42</sup> Carl Oatley, *Bougainville: An Australian Security Problem*, Australian Defence Studies Centre, Working Paper No.8, Canberra, 1993, p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Layton, p.303 and 316.

<sup>44</sup> Charles W. Ricks, *The Military-News Media Relationship: Thinking Forward*, Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, December 1993, p.14.

<sup>45</sup> Oatley, p.8.

<sup>46</sup> All warfare is based upon deception. Samuel B. Griffith, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1971, p.66.

relationship between the Central Government and the press shifts subtly from one of mutual interests to one of competing interests during conflict situations. The Central Government has shown a disjointed policy towards the media during this crisis, perhaps as a reflection of its politics and the confusing nature of this type of conflict.

### ***Political-Military Interface***

Selection and maintenance of the aim is a fundamental military principal widely recognised in military centres of learning and doubtless introduced to the military hierarchy of PNG.<sup>47</sup> The PNGDF, schooled in the military arts with Australian assistance, understands perhaps in contrast to the Government that in order to win this conflict, it must have clearly defined aims and goals formulated by its civil leadership, something the former has often lamented and often protested:

‘Indiscipline amongst the PNGDF and police (not just amongst soldiers but in relations between the national government and some senior staff) has been a feature of this conflict.’<sup>48</sup>

The unauthorised total withdrawal of all security forces from Buka and Bougainville in March 1990 is a good example of military-political disunity.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, frustrations have led the PNGDF to be widely perceived as lacking discipline and the officer corps is becoming increasingly politicised along regional lines.<sup>50</sup> For example, Colonel Leo Nui’s unauthorised actions in retaking Buka from the BRA in April 1991 although securing military advantage breached the then current political agreements. Subsequently, he was sacked after voicing his opinions of his military and political superiors to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s *Four Corners* program. As a direct result, his replacement ‘insisted that the government clarify its objectives in Bougainville and the military’s role in them’ before he took up his new posting.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, this officer’s career reflects PNG society’s divisions and politics. Nui (who confirmed the so-called St. Valentine’s Day Massacre of six civilians, subsequently dumped into the sea from Australian supplied PNGDF helicopters)<sup>52</sup> replaced his former Commander, Brigadier General Jerry Singarok as head of the PNGDF following the Sandline mercenary affair. This effectively saw the end of the Chan Coalition Government and the beginning of the present Skate Coalition Government. Sadly, the business of Government is never automatic, it demands constant attention to detail without overlooking national goals. Thus, it takes a leadership with vision to orchestrate national efforts to achieve unity with these national goals. Arguably this has not been consistently achieved due to the divisive nature of national politics and misunderstandings fuelling frustrations at the political-

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<sup>47</sup> *The Fundamentals of Land Warfare*, Commonwealth of Australia (Australian Army), Southwood Press, Sydney, 1993, p.25.

<sup>48</sup> Ron May, *The Situation on Bougainville*, p. ii.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>50</sup> Peter King, *Bougainville Beyond the Crisis*, in *Current Affairs Bulletin*, Vol.67, No.8 January 1991, p.28.

<sup>51</sup> Yaw Saffu, *The Bougainville Crisis and Politics in Papua New Guinea*, in *The Contemporary Pacific*, Fall 1992, p.329.

<sup>52</sup> Layton, p.312.

military interface.<sup>53</sup> PNG politics is characterised by its parochial divisions which leads to its unkindly labelled "revolving door" Governments. Although I do not fully subscribe to the view by some authors that there must be a certain healthy conflict between institutions in the system of checks and balances,<sup>54</sup> the resulting incoherence and paralysis become obvious hurdles to good governance.

Nevertheless, it is not enough to have the political will to achieve these aims, one must also have commensurate means to achieve that end. Even though PNG has a military force of over four thousand soldiers and is the richest amongst Pacific island states, it is not self-sufficient in the small military equipment holdings required to prosecute a low level military contingency such as it is now facing. As the United States found in Vietnam, this type of conflict has the ability to absorb a lot of personnel and material. Additionally, the role of the PNGDF has been changing as a reflection of new strategic realities. Whereas Indonesia was viewed as the threat in the past, the current insurgency has shown the limits to both the PNGDF and the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary (RPNGC).<sup>55</sup> This may be a result of an unconscious Australian policy of creating the PNGDF in its own image. As a result, it was often voiced by PNGDF officers that the training and equipment they received from Australia were concentrated upon conventional threats and not upon low-level guerrilla or counter-insurgency operations. This frustration manifested itself in the deadlock of the Defence Cooperation Program with Australia that may have been part of the reason the military agreed to the mercenary solution. At the beginning of the crisis, an intelligence report on Bougainville stated that the PNGDF had neither the military nor logistical means to execute a successful operation against the BRA.<sup>56</sup> The proof of this is that without continued Australian logistic support it would definitely be much harder for the PNGDF to battle the BRA. However, I believe that the Government resolve had built up to such a stage that withdrawal of all Australian logistical support would just have resulted in the procuring of PNGDF logistics from alternative countries.

Public support is the foundation upon which to build political, economic, diplomatic and psychological cohesion. Additionally they must have the financial and logistical support with which to undertake the job in hand. Getting very little of any of the above, it is perhaps understandable why the PNGDF seemed frustrated at times, seeing themselves as hamstrung by political and financial constraints. One perception shared by ex Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan, is that Australia is not granting them enough aid to end the

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<sup>53</sup> Yaw Saffu, pp.325-326.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Lamour, *Political Institutions*, in Howe, Kiste and Lal (eds.), p.383.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Dibb and Rhondda Nicholas, *Restructuring the Papua New Guinea Defence Force: Strategic Analysis and Force Structure Principles for a Small State*, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1996, pp.16-22.

<sup>56</sup> Ron May, *The Situation on Bougainville*, p.8.

conflict quickly military.<sup>57</sup> On the contrary, the Australian position seemed strongly in favour of a political solution and declared against any military solution in Bougainville.<sup>58</sup>

### *The Australian Role in the Crisis*

There seems to be a dichotomy between Australia's declared human rights principles in being a good international citizen and its strategic regional objective of the stability of its nearest neighbour. It is plain for an observer to see Australia's interest in PNG. However, overly enthusiastic support may prove counter-productive and embarrassing. Arguably what happened with the Australian supplied Iroquois helicopters as well as patrol boats both used in cross border-raids into Solomon Islands' sovereign territory. Thus Senator Evans' statement of January 1990 sets the position:

'From a purely self-interested Australian regional security strategic perspective...the fragmentation of PNG is something that we see as being a very unhealthy development in regional security and stability terms and one that we would like to see avoided at all costs.'<sup>59</sup>

This statement was marked by increasing military aid to PNG in the form of helicopters, small arms and ammunition as well as financing the expansion of the PNGDF. The assistance would be consistent in the Australian policy of aiding a legitimate Government when help was requested. Such was the case in the riots in Port Vila, Vanuatu in 1980, as well as logistics and communications help (of the PNGDF deployment during the Santo Rebellion at Vanuatu's independence). This was also the rationale behind the debate about aiding the legitimate Bavandra Government during the Fiji coups of 1987.

Nevertheless, there were also contending objectives in Australia's aid policy. On the one hand, the 'realist' school think that PNG's unity should be maintained by Australia at all costs. On the other, the economic rationalists state that PNG should be eventually cut off from direct Australian financial support in favour of project aid as well as encouraging the PNG government towards more stringent fiscal policies. Perhaps more serious is the conflict between this Australian 'constructive commitment' to the region and the principle of the non-violation of Pacific islands' national sovereignty.<sup>60</sup>

The Australian dilemma continues to be that whilst it must be seen to support the rule of law and uphold the Central Government in PNG, it should not be seen as interfering or abetting in an internal guerrilla conflict. However, this position as the ex-colonial power

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<sup>57</sup> *Bougainville: Downer leads peace initiative*, by Craig Skehan, The Sydney Morning Herald, 24 April 1997. Accessed at <http://www.smh.com.au/daily/content/970424/pageone/pageone3.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Since Bob Hawke the bipartisan position has remained constant. Gareth Evans, *Bougainville: the Way Forward*, Government response to the Report of the Parliamentary Delegation to Bougainville 8 June 1994. Pp.1-3. Also Craig Skehan, *Bougainville: Downer leads peace initiative*, The Sydney Morning Herald, 24 April 1997. Accessed on 31 March 1998 at <http://www.smh.com.au/daily/content/970424/pageone/pageone3.html>.

<sup>59</sup> Gareth Evans quoted by Greg Fry in *Australia and the South Pacific*, P.J. Boyce and J.R. Angel (eds.), *Diplomacy in the Marketplace: Australia in World Affairs 1981-1990*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1992, p. 189.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, pp.192-193.

and the historical baggage that this carries, including the ownership of major investments in PNG, puts it in an unenviable position.<sup>61</sup> Therefore:

‘Australia thus treads a fine line of interest without paternalism, investment and aid without undue control, mutual security support without direct involvement and concern for human rights without seeking to avoid antagonising PNG officials and undermining the relationship.’<sup>62</sup>

Ultimately, there is no easy answer to this problem, just as there is no easy answer to the Bougainville problem. What is clear is that there must be an ongoing commitment to the pursuit of dialogue with all parties concerned. In other words, a political solution, exactly what the Australian position has stressed, yet is sometimes undermined by its military strategic actions.

### **Conclusion**

Separatist claims directly conflict with the views of successive PNG Central Governments and, indirectly, Australian interests. Although legitimate legal claims may be made on the grounds of ethnicity, geography, linguistics and their consistent repudiation of Central Government rule, the latter will not easily give up due to their fear of further provincial fragmentation. The economic argument whether this is the catalyst or the main cause of the rebellion may not be central to the issue. Certainly, the economic viability of the mine is not in doubt although some estimates put the cost of restarting operations at over AUD\$500 million.<sup>63</sup> This may put it in a better economic situation than many of its neighbouring Pacific island states.

In a country characterised by divisions, Bougainville may be a special case. The history of the peoples of Bougainville has shown that they can be particularly tenacious if given a uniting central cause such as this issue of independence which has repeatedly surfaced post the 1960s. The strong link that people felt towards their land is certainly a contributing factor towards their sentiments on secession, as is their unity against outsiders. Apart from the economic differences that the BCL mine introduced, the vast ecological damage and loss of fertile land (with hunting grounds and gardens) and poisoning of rivers have had a cultural impact upon the population. Feelings have run so high that this may be the one cause which temporarily has united different age, linguistic, cultural and political groupings on Bougainville. Although the population seem weary of the prolonged conflict and long for peace, ethno-nationalistic conflict is an unpredictable phenomenon which may flare up again in future generations.

The Central Government would be wise to be aware of the issues raised by the Bougainville problem if it is to ease future investor confidence. This confidence has not impacted negatively upon the PNG economy; in fact the economy has absorbed it rather

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<sup>61</sup> Oatley, p.8. Also Stephen Henningham, *The Foreign and Defence Policies of South Pacific States*, in Henningham and Ball (eds.), p.72.

<sup>62</sup> Oatley, p.9.

<sup>63</sup> John Wright, *Fragile Peace*, The Courier-Mail, 11 May 1998.

well since 1989 as other large revenue projects have commenced production. This situation contrasts successive Governments' handling of both the media and the military during the crisis. In a democracy, a free press has an important part to play as a balanced voice against excesses. Unfortunately, much of the PNG press is focussed on the urban areas to the detriment of the provinces. This has tended to mean that they effectively voice Government opinions and perceptions. Only a small minority of the press, which has Church backing, provided the other side of the story consistently.

Successive Governments have shown inconsistent leadership that has led to much frustration on the part of the PNGDF and RPNGC. Burdened with the task of counter-insurgency, they have shown little success against the BRA, even with Australian training and logistical support. This equation will be even more heavily weighted against the Government unless it sets clear-cut and achievable political goals from which its military can derive their aims. After repeated patterns of fighting and negotiating, the military failures have perhaps at last shown that there can be no lasting military solution. There can only be a political solution.

The Bougainville crisis has intensified and complicated PNG Australian relations. It has posed some dilemmas for both PNG and Australian policy makers to ponder. These dichotomies need answers if the future of this relationship is to be smoother, especially from an economic dimension. What is vital to any government, is the guiding light of a political strategic aim – without which the national endeavour would be cast adrift and in grave danger of foundering.

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