**The Bougainville Conflict**

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It's hard to prepare this while East Timor is being devastated, because the parallels between them are often so close; yet in many ways Bougainville is now a 'good news' story where Timor right now is the very worst of news. Perhaps thinking about Bougainville's experience today will help when trying to make sense of Timor.

When I was at ANU through the first half of the 1990s, Bougainville was like a great dark cloud hanging over anyone who was interested in the region; you couldn't get away from the conflict and what it represented, whether it was the focus of your studies or not.

Bougainville is an island in the eastern-most part of Papua New Guinea, 200 km long and 40 km wide, which runs roughly north-west to south-east; the Bougainville group also contains other smaller islands, the most important of which is Buka, which sits off the north end of Bougainville. The population of the group is usually estimated at around 150-160,000, but no one's quite sure of the exact figures nowadays.

Culturally it is quite distinct from the rest of Papua New Guinea, but then that is true of almost any area in Papua New Guinea: after all, PNG is a country with over 600 different language groups—that's languages, not dialects—fifteen of which live on Bougainville itself.

What's more significant is that Bougainville has strong cultural links to the Solomon Islands; the Bougainville islands in fact form (or formed, depending on your perspective) the North Solomons Province of PNG. The southernmost point of Bougainville is only seven kilometres from the northernmost point of the Solomons, whereas Bougainville as a whole is 500 km from the PNG mainland, and almost 1000 km from Port Moresby.

So it is something of a historical accident that Bougainville became part of Papua New Guinea. It was first encountered by Europeans two hundred years ago, and German traders and planters were active there from the 1860s; quite early when one considers that the PNG highlands had no contact with outsiders until the 1930s. Germany annexed Bougainville at the end of the 19th century, at a time when it also colonised New Guinea—the northern half of what's now PNG—and the Solomon Islands. Then, in 1898, it ceded the Solomon Islands to Great Britain, as part of a deal between Germany, Britain, and the US over territory in Samoa. But it kept Bougainville!

Then, through the first half of the twentieth century, Bougainville changed hands—along with the rest of New Guinea—several times. After World War One it became part of the League of Nations mandated territory of New Guinea, administered by Australia, which already had colonial jurisdiction over the southern area of Papua. Then for three years of World War Two it was controlled by Japan, and was the scene of intense fighting and bombardment by American forces. After the war, it went back to Australian control under the auspices of the UN; and in 1975 it became part of the newly independent nation of Papua New Guinea.

Now, I'll pause for a moment and reflect on what that history meant for people on Bougainville. They had had a long history of colonial contact by PNG standards, under different masters. They had not reaped any particular rewards from that contact, to the point where in World War Two many Bougainvilleans welcomed the Japanese as representing possibly a better deal for them than the Germans and Australians. The war thus created extra divisions between Bougainvilleans—pro-Japanese versus pro-Allied Bougainvilleans—over the top of the different clan and language group divisions that already existed. Those divisions took a long time to heal—the last 'reconciliation feast' to resolve disputes of the 1940s was held in the mid-1980s. And the war also brought the deaths of 25 percent of the Bougainville population.

After World War Two, the island experienced high population growth of 4 percent p.a., among the highest in the world. At first that was fine, but over time it brought land pressures, competition for resources among Bougainvilleans—remembering that, as in so much of the Pacific, much prime agricultural land had been taken over by European interests and used to produce export crops, mainly copra (dried coconut). So the seeds of unrest were there.

And then in 1964, Australian geologists found evidence of copper and gold deposits on the island, and within ten years Bougainville was home to the world's biggest copper mine at Panguna, in the mountains of the south east of Bougainville. Basically, they sliced the top off a mountain, and built an open-cut mine six by four kilometres in area, affecting tens of thousands of hectares in total: villages were moved, people were displaced, and the environmental effects over time were quite devastating, with mine effluent discharged into rivers used by thousands of people downstream.

The company operating the mine, Bougainville Copper Limited, was mostly owned by the Australian company Rio Tinto Zinc, which took the lion's share of the profits. At first, the PNG administration benefited very little, taking only 1.25 percent of profits; but after independence this was renegotiated to twenty percent. Bougainvilleans themselves received only five percent of the government's share—i.e., 5 percent of 1.25 percent and later 20 percent. So at first that was only $600 for every million dollars profit; afterwards, a somewhat improved $10,000 per million.

The mine also brought other significant changes. The building of the mine and its subsequent operation involved the influx of thousands, even tens of thousands in the building phase, of workers from mainland PNG—'redskins', as they were called by the locals, who like others in the Solomons area were very much black skins. They remained a visible reminder of outside intervention in Bougainville's affairs.

Another significant change was that with the coming of the mine the administration of Bougainville moved from Buka, where it had always been under the Germans and Australians, to the new port town of Arawa, built by BCL. This set in train resentments on Buka, whose people always considered themselves distinct from the mainland Bougainvilleans.

So through the late 1960s and early 1970s this huge mine is being built, which will be of enormous economic importance to the emerging nation of Papua New Guinea, which at the same time is being prepared very rapidly for independence by Australia, thanks to a marked shift in Australian and international attitudes towards colonisation. And there's a lot of uncertainty about how PNG will fare after independence—will it be able to maintain its independence in the face of powerful neighbours; will it be able to use its own resources for its own benefit? Remember that Papua New Guinea shares a border with Irian Jaya.

Meanwhile, Bougainvilleans are looking at independence as an opportunity to right some historical wrongs. You see the full range of opinions: that Bougainville should be an autonomous part of a PNG federation; that Bougainville should become part of the Solomon Islands, which was being prepared for independence by Britain at this same time (it became independent in 1978); or that Bougainville should become completely independent. The only view not widely held on Bougainville was that it should become just another part of a unitary PNG state.

So in the few years leading up to independence for PNG there was a strong independence movement on Bougainville (there was also a Papuan independence movement on the PNG mainland). As a direct result of this, PNG put in place a system of 19 provincial governments—but without the level of autonomy we associate with state governments in Australia, and without any real funding. Indeed, the people of Bougainville only kept their own provincial government going by taxing themselves.

So: independence arrived in 1975, and for the next ten years the Panguna mine was the second largest source of income for the new government of PNG after foreign aid. Incredibly important to the nation. Meanwhile, Bougainvilleans felt that they were seeing little benefit: although to be fair, the company did bring with it a lot of developments (schools, hospitals, infrastructure) that did benefit Bougainvilleans, or at least those who lived in the areas closest to the mine; and relative to other areas of PNG, its people fared pretty well. But that was tempered by the environmental damage being caused, and the perception that Bougainville's resources were being exploited almost entirely for the benefit of others. And when you consider that Rio Tinto Zinc took 53 percent of the profits, they had a point.

Most Bougainvilleans saw little direct benefit from the mine; fifty percent still made a living in the copra industry. And in 1987-88 the world price for copra fell by a third, which had a major impact on a great many Bougainvilleans. So by 1988 they're feeling the economic pinch; in short, they feel resentful of outside interests, be they Australian or Papua New Guinean, and feel that they've been given short shrift.

In 1988, this all came to a head. A team of dissidents led by Francis Ona, a former mine-worker, stole some BCL explosives and used them to blow up a power generator at the Panguna mine. They stated that they wanted a renegotiation of the royalty arrangements, and ten million dollars compensation for Bougainvilleans; and there was talk once more of renegotiation of Bougainville's political status within PNG, and even independence.

Effectively, this was a localised dispute born out of economic frustrations and a general resentment of the failures of colonialism and postcolonialism (which, after all, were traits not confined to Bougainville). PNG's reaction, though, was extreme; in hindsight, it was a gross over-reaction. The PNG government sent the PNG Defence Force and Royal PNG Constabulary into Bougainville in force, and they moved to put down the revolt in a heavy-handed way. The situation deteriorated, both sides squaring off against each other; Ona and his supporters formed the BRA, the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, declared the formation of a Bougainville Interim Government with Ona at its head, and started engaging in guerilla warfare against the PNGDF. They had nothing on their side, at first, except the mountainous and jungled terrain of Bougainville itself, and the sympathies of many Bougainvilleans; they didn't even have any weapons until they managed to steal some from the PNGDF.

The PNG government was widely criticised over the conflict that followed, especially given some of the atrocities that occurred at the hands of the PNGDF—an Amnesty International report a couple of years into the conflict said that Bougainville had some of the worst cases of human rights abuses they had encountered. But to be fair, PNG was in an awkward position: Bougainville was not only one of the country's major sources of revenue—and this in a third world country, where every revenue stream counts—there was also the bigger issue of what would happen to PNG if Bougainville went its own way.

For those who would explore the parallels between Bougainville and East Timor, this is where you'd have to draw some careful distinctions. Bougainville was not a separate colony invaded by PNG many years after PNG itself became independent; it was as much a part of 'Papua New Guinea', which after all was a colonial construct, a nation made up of hundreds of different nationalities, language groups, tribes, as any other part of PNG. Its politicians had played important roles in PNG politics since independence; it had been a central contributor to government coffers from day one.

In a country of 600 language groups, any sign that the PNG government was willing to grant independence to a rebel province could have catastrophic consequences. This was much more true thirteen years into independence than it had been in 1975, which was a much more hopeful time by comparison. By the mid-1980s, law and order was a significant problem for PNG as a whole; and the PNG people had had time to become disillusioned about the benefits of independence. You had significant government corruption and kickbacks; a lot of money which should have benefited the country as a whole was benefitting only a few. People outside Moresby had more cause in 1988 to think about the possibility of going it alone than they had in 1975, and that was of great concern to those with an interest in keeping PNG together. So of course they would do all they could to keep the country together.

But at enormous cost. The Bougainville conflict lasted for nine years, and one cannot say that it is completely resolved even today, two years after a truce and eighteen months after a formal ceasefire. Estimates of the number of people killed in that nine years range from 10,000 to 50,000—no-one really knows—and of course everyone on Bougainville was affected by the conflict. Schools, hospitals, government infrastructure were destroyed by the BRA; the PNGDF for its part also wreaked enormous damage. A generation of Bougainvilleans grew up in the context of violence and lawlessness, with no access to education or proper health facilities. Today, there are many parts of Bougainville where hardly anyone speaks Pidgin (the lingua franca of PNG), let alone English; Bougainvilleans have been cut off from the world.

Literally cut off. PNG imposed a media and aid embargo on the island from 1990-91. Throughout the early '90s, the conflict was largely hidden from world view. Australia took a neighbourly interest in seeing the matter resolved, but had had its fingers burned early on in the conflict, when the use by the PNGDF of Australian-provided Iroquois helicopters to attack Bougainvilleans caused a public outcry here which severely embarrassed the Hawke government. Australia also had an obvious interest in maintaining the sovereign integrity of PNG; it was our former colony, after all, and still our number-one aid recipient; and it's not hard to imagine its strategic significance to Australia as part of a regional balance-of-power, and how much more difficult that would be to maintain should PNG disintegrate into a dozen different countries.

Through the early nineties there were various abortive attempts to resolve the conflict. There was a short-lived cease-fire in 1994 which eventually collapsed and led to a new wave of violence. The PNG backed a Bougainville Transitional Government based on the island of Buka, and controlled very little of Bougainville itself; Arawa remained in the hands of the BIG and BRA.

Attempts by the PNG Government to buy control of BCL were rejected by the BRA as a solution. Attempts by Australia to broker peace were rejected because of what was seen as its compromised position in relation to BCL and the PNG government. An attempt at peace talks in the Solomons didn't even get off the ground after the Bougainville Transitional Government failed to turn up.

Then in early 1997 it emerged that the PNG government of Sir Julius Chan, in a last-ditch attempt to resolve matters, had spent close to forty million dollars to engage mercenaries from an international company called Sandline to go into Bougainville and defeat the BRA. Before this could happen, the PNG military under General Singirok intervened (partly out of outrage at the affront to the PNGDF this represented, and also out of outrage that the $40 million wouldn't be spent on the military if it went to Sandline). Singirok didn't stage a military coup, as such, but forced the government to back down, and triggered new elections in mid-1997, which Chan's government lost.

The new government of Bill Skate announced that peace in Bougainville was one of its number one priorities. And it was out of this environment that an opportunity for peace, if not for resolution of the issues that had triggered the conflict, emerged.

Members of the New Zealand foreign affairs department sensed that the time was right for some careful moves to bring the opposing sides together. With the approval, but not the participation, of the PNG government, they brought members of the BRA, BIG, and BTG, to the Burnham military base outside Christchurch for talks. After nine years of conflict and many previous failures, these were, as you can imagine, aimed solely at getting the two sides talking to each other, rather than resolving the conflict once and for all there and then. But they were a definite start. They were followed a few months later by 'Burnham II', which resulted in a truce being declared in November 1997; and then in January 1998 by a further meeting at Lincoln University, again at Christchurch, where an agreement was signed setting out a timetable for Bougainville.

One can't understate the enormous importance of New Zealand's role—making the right diplomatic moves at the right time. Australia could not have staged a comparable series of delicate meetings, even if it had wanted to, for the sorts of reasons I've already described. New Zealand had no economic and colonial baggage where Bougainville was concerned; it was free to play the role of honest broker in a way that Australia was not.

But neither should one give New Zealand undue credit for 'bringing peace to Bougainville', because the truth is that peace came to Bougainville because Bougainvilleans wanted it. They were well and truly worn out by nine years of guerilla warfare, and ready for it to end. This was particularly true of the women of Bougainville, who had always been a major social force: Bougainville is almost entirely a matrilineal society, where land is passed down on the mother's side. Women had suffered enormously during the conflict: having to give birth in the bush without any access to medical facilities, many suffering gynaecological problems as a result; having to keep society going, carrying most of the burden of child-rearing, educating children, growing crops, while men fought in the BRA.

There were internal divisions: the BRA was not some monolithic organisation, as that single acronym would suggest, but a series of factions, some with quite different aims, even on the key issue of independence versus greater autonomy within PNG. There was no more significant sign of this than Francis Ona's refusal to be a part of the peace process, and his rejection of the presence of any peace monitoring group on Bougainville that had Australians in it. At first it was feared that this would derail the peace process; but as it turns out, it hasn't. The majority of the BRA have effectively defected from their former leader, who remains in control of the area immediately surrounding the Panguna mine.

In the end, the first Truce Monitoring Group did have Australians in it—about 100 Australians, in a multinational force of New Zealanders, Australians, niVanuatu and Fijians, headed by the New Zealand Military. It was a landmark exercise in many ways: the first time the ADF had served under New Zealand military command; a group made up of four nationalities, drawn from the ranks of the military, police forces, and bureaucracy (DFAT and Department of Defence). Most significantly, they were all unarmed. By all accounts it was a steep learning curve for all involved, as different cultures (national and military versus civilian) interacted among themselves in the TMG, and with Bougainvilleans. Australians felt at a disadvantage compared with Fijians, niVanuatu and the mostly Maori members of the New Zealand military, all of whom had a 'cultural head-start' when it came to dealing with Bougainvilleans. When the Truce Monitoring Group gave way to a Peace Monitoring Group in May 1998 (after the ceasefire of 30 April 1998), under Australian command and with a much larger contingent of Australians present (most people stayed on Bougainville for a three-month rotation, so there have been several rotations to date), there was concern that the baggage Australia brought to the island in the eyes of Bougainvilleans would lead to the collapse of the peace process; but as it turns out, this has been avoided.

Most significant of all, I think, has been the fact that the TMG and PMG have been unarmed, and have been directed to maintain a strict neutrality (though certainly that's difficult to do when you're on the ground dealing predominantly with one side or the other). By being unarmed, their safety has become the responsibility of all sides in the conflict, who remain armed—the issue of disarmament is proceeding very carefully and slowly. Again, it's a sign of how much both sides want peace that there have been no causualties in the TMG and PMG (although there have still been some deaths among Bougainvilleans).

The TMG and PMG have basically been creating a political space for the return of some measure of law and order, and for the reconstruction of infrastructure to commence. Millions of aid dollars are flowing into Bougainville already, and on these basic issues the future is looking much brighter.

But the peace process is now entering possibly its most difficult time. Since 1997, the basic question of the political future of Bougainville—to stay with PNG, or to become independent—has not been addressed. The PNG government's position (and Australia's, for that matter) has not changed: Bougainville must remain part of PNG. The overwhelming majority of Bougainvilleans, on the other hand, are committed to independence. May 1999 saw the election of an 87-member Bougainville People's Congress, 77 of whom subsequently voted in Joseph Kabui as their President. Kabui was the last premier of the province of North Solomons, and a prominent member of the BRA/BIG. And he has announced unequivocally that Bougainvilleans remain committed to independence.