

Peace Treaty for Bougainville. First Step Toward Independence from Papua-New Guinea?
by Oswald Iten, 2 June 2001

SSGM Note - Although this article contains a number of interesting points, it also contains numerous inaccuracies.

On 1 June, in Port Moresby armed factions and the minister for Bougainville affairs signed a peace treaty for the secessionist island. This had been preceded by an agreement on disarming the rebels and withdrawing Papua-New Guinea's troops. Whether or not Bougainville will be allowed to secede from the island nation is to be decided in a referendum, prior to which a long phase of autonomy is scheduled. The parliament in Port Moresby has yet to approve the necessary constitutional amendment.

In 1997 the government of Papua-New Guinea committed a mad, desperate act: it hired a British-South African troop of mercenaries from the firm of Sandline International. But not even that was enough to bring about a military solution to the bloodiest fighting in the South Pacific since the Second World War. Since its outbreak in 1988, the war of secession on Bougainville has cost about 15,000 lives. After achievement of a cease-fire four years ago, there was tough negotiating over a final peace treaty, which the major parties to the fighting accepted on 1 June - conditional on approval by the cabinet of Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta and a constitutional amendment by the parliament. The initial breakthrough had come in early May with an agreement to disarm the two sides in the island's civil war.

High Hopes

The undefeated secessionists of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) steadily refused to give up their weapons as long as units of the Papua-New Guinea Defence Forces (PNGDF) were still stationed on the island and their local auxiliary, the Bougainville Resistance Forces (BRF), had not also disarmed. Once the army pledged itself in May to a gradual withdrawal, the rebels and militiamen also agreed to turn in their weapons. In a rush of enthusiasm immediately following the signing of the disarmament agreement, Ian Prentice, the adviser on loan to the hostile parties from the Australian government, declared that Bougainville could become the scene of one of the most successful peacemaking efforts in the postwar era. But Ishmael Toroama, the commander of the BRA, immediately countered with a more sober assessment: "The weapons do not belong to the organization. Every fighter has acquired his own. Some have slept with them for ten years and love them more than their wives."

According to the pact, the approximately 2,500 to 3,000 fighters of the BRA and BRF must turn their guns in to their own commanders, who will safeguard them until the government troops have been withdrawn from their respective districts. Then a two-thirds majority of the parliament in Port Moresby has to amend the constitution so that a vote can be taken on an Autonomy Statute for Bougainville which would provide for a referendum on complete independence to be held sometime in the period between 2011 and 2016. Only after that constitutional amendment has been approved are the stored weapons to be placed under UN supervision.

A Key Player Absent

All negotiations so far have been burdened by the conspicuous absence of Francis Ona, the "father" of Bougainville's rebellion. Ona is a member of the landowning clan that rose up against the Panguna copper mine in 1988. Within a few months it had forced the closing of what had been until then the world's largest open-pit mine. In 1990, the PNGDF was forced to withdraw from the island, and Ona unilaterally declared Bougainville independent. But in 1992 government troops regained a foothold, and the war became really ugly. Bougainville is by no means ethnically homogeneous, and the Port Moresby regime did not have much difficulty equipping Ona's opponents with weapons. Subsequently, some particularly grisly incidents occurred involving the Resistance Forces. Ona continues to maintain firm control over the Panguna region, and now refers to his troops

as the Mekamui Defence Forces (Defence Forces of the Sacred Land). As a local potentate, known here as Bigman, he rules over the area and its people and implements his rigid ideas of an independent regime. He also rejects any and all humanitarian assistance. When a medical team arrived around Christmas to inoculate the children against measles and polio, their vehicle was destroyed. Ona, a strictly religious Christian, believes that there is nothing to negotiate, since he already won the war back in 1990. On the other side, apparently there is hardly a politician in Port Moresby who can even conceive of secession. For them, Bougainville's great importance lies in the Panguna mine. During its 17 years of operation, the giant mining facility produced 3 million tons of copper, 306 tons of gold and 784 tons of silver - the equivalent of a full 44 percent of Papua-New Guinea's total exports during that period. In early May, however, Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) announced its final withdrawal from the island.

Secret Advisers

Ona is surrounded by a secretive group which calls itself simply "the team" and reportedly consists of seven persons. Among them are William Nakin and Michael Puposan, two businessmen from Buka. Puposan maintains categorically: "We do not intend to ever reopen the Panguna mine. When we began our struggle, there was only one mine in Papua-New Guinea; today there are fifteen, and the country is poorer than ever. We do not need the mine. Formerly, we lived together in harmony. The chief was responsible for everything. Our women, the focus of our society, have been torn from their traditional structure." This is his way of saying that Ona's group is not pleased by the fact that it was largely the women of Bougainville who demanded an end to the war. Oddly enough, the two men are both shareholders in the gold mine on Lihir, a neighboring island. Ona's group has lodged a class-action suit in the USA against Rio Tinto, the parent company of Bougainville Copper Limited. In 1972, when the Panguna mine began operations, Australia was still the ruling colonial power in Papua-New Guinea. As the driving force behind BCL and as Port Moresby's military protector, Canberra has played a shadowy role on Bougainville. Today, Australia is once again playing a leading part, this time as a peacemaker. The country finances and commands the Peace Monitoring Group (PMG) which consists of about 200 unarmed soldiers, policemen and advisers. Part of its mandate is to supervise the cease-fire. It maintains four helicopters in the service of the negotiating parties. The former colonial rulers pay out some 20 million Australian dollars a year to sustain the PMG. Australia also pumps the most development funds into the reconstruction of Bougainville's devastated infrastructure.

Mixed Feelings

Like Francis Ona, Joseph Kabui, the political leader of the BRA (which, unlike Ona, is willing to engage in negotiations), calls himself "president." He has mixed feelings toward Australia. Without Australia, he says, the war would not have happened, but he also concedes that without Australia the peace process would never have gotten started. He calls Australia "our big brother in the Pacific" and adds, "We must make sure that Australia does not make the same mistake again." In his view, it would be a mistake to work toward reopening Panguna. The island's big problem is internal unity, declares Kabui, who has been a cabinet minister in Port Moresby several times and today heads the broadly inclusive Bougainville People's Congress. "We all have one goal: Bougainville's independence."

From that perspective, Ona's stubborn standing on the sidelines looks like nothing but a clever negotiating ploy. But others speak of the nucleus of another civil war, even without any action by Port Moresby. Perhaps the long transition period built into the Autonomy Statute will serve as a cooling-off period during which the people of this island can rethink their drive for independence.