

Rebel PNG Province to Gain Autonomy **by Mary-Louise O'Callaghan, 26 June 2001**

PAPUA New Guinea and Bougainville leaders have agreed on a political settlement of the Bougainville crisis that will give the rebel province sweeping autonomy and an eventual referendum on independence.

After four years of negotiations, which followed almost a decade of conflict on the island, the breakthrough agreement is expected to be endorsed by the PNG cabinet in the next few days. Minister for Bougainville Affairs Moi Avei said the "terrible events which made such an agreement necessary" should never be allowed to happen again. "The details of the agreement for Bougainville to have autonomy within the Papua New Guinea constitution have been agreed," he said yesterday. The deal follows earlier breakthroughs this year on issues of weapons disposal, the presence of the PNG Defence Force on the island and a future referendum on independence.

Under the agreement, the referendum will be held no more than 15 years and no less than 10 years after the establishment of the autonomous government, which is expected to come into existence next year. Mr Avei said the end of the negotiations put the Bougainville peace process at its most "crucial turning point" since fighting ceased in 1997. But there was now "an agreed road-map for dealing with some of the most difficult and sensitive issues in the entire peace process".

The Papua New Guinea Government would now draft a Bougainville autonomy bill for consideration by parliament, which sits again next month. Although cabinet approval is expected to be virtually automatic, it is less certain whether the agreement will gain the required support of PNG's national MPs. Because the deal involves amendments to PNG's independence constitution, two sittings of the national parliament must pass the amendments by a two-thirds majority. "Those of us who have co-operated in designing the agreed autonomy arrangements now face the challenge of explaining our joint creation to the rest of the nation, and mobilising support for the legislation required to give it effect," Mr Avei said.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer yesterday praised the patience shown by leaders in the difficult negotiations, but warned that much work remained. "There will be a need for continued commitment and strong leadership by all parties, especially in the early implementation of plans for the disposal of weapons," Mr Downer said.

The founder of the secession movement on Bougainville, Francis Ona - who took up arms against the giant Australian-owned and operated copper mine BCL - has recently come out against the arrangements for autonomy, saying people should not be tricked into thinking this was the same as independence. The PNG Government, which resisted the secessionists in a bloody civil war for almost a decade from 1988 to 1997, claims the conflict led to hundreds of deaths. But Bougainvilleans have always claimed thousands died, including indirectly as a result of lack of medicines and malnutrition.