The Bougainville Crisis:
A South Pacific Crofters’ War

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As Papua New Guinea (PNG) moves through its fifteenth year of independence, this democratic Pacific island nation of 3.5 million people is in turmoil over social change, land rights and ecological disasters. For the past year one of the world’s biggest mines located on Bougainville island has produced no copper and gold due to sabotage by village landowners. As this article goes to press, there is an uneasy ceasefire in the civil war between Government and villagers which has claimed over 130 lives in the past year. The most militant Bougainvillean want the mine closed and want the North Solomons Province to secede as an independent republic. The national government, on the other hand, want to maintain integrity of the state and, having lost the 17% of national revenue which came from the mine, were forced to devalue the kina by 10% in January.

The villagers’ life is largely based on subsistence agriculture, fishing and cocoa growing. Customarily the concept of individual land ownership was alien, forests and rivers belonging to varying clans who had specified usage rights in much the same way as our own common grazings are held. Indeed, in a tropical rainforest sense, the peoples of PNG are largely crofters. Having grown up on Lewis in the old Hebrides and spent four years working in PNG and involved with other Melanesian (black skinned Pacific island) countries such as Vanuatu — the New Hebrides — I have frequently experienced a sense of rootedness twelve thousand miles away which cultural changes in Scotland have endangered at home.

Potential and actual Bougainville-like situations abound throughout Melanesia to the extent that a new verb, ‘to bougainville’ is gaining currency in situations where local people have found environmental, social or economic aspects of a development to be unacceptable and have taken direct action to block operations. For instance, in 1987, after 20 years of land disputes and rainforest devastation, villagers exercising civil disobedience forced a Unilever subsidiary, Levers Pacific Timbers, out of the Solomon Islands.

But none better illustrates the consequence of ecocide than the Bougainville Copper Ltd (BCL) mine at Panguna. The trouble dates back to 1963 when the parent company, Conzinc Rio-Tinto Australia (CRA), was granted a prospecting licence by the Australian colonial government to develop what Sir...
Val Duncan, chairman of Rio Tinto-Zinc, was to describe in 1969 as "the jewel in our crown". Local people objected to the presence of geologists in their area, there having been no consultation with the elderly women who held land on behalf of the matrilineal clans. Harvard University anthropologist, Prof. Douglas Oliver, advised BCL they were dealing with a primitive and superstitious people, "who would probably get used to the company's presence".

To deaf ears of colonial administrators seeking to build a resource base for future national development, the landowners pointed out that copper would not rot in the ground. They wanted it to stay there for another twenty years until their children were educated and could better decide what was in their clans' interest. By the mid '60s the international press was carrying pictures of local women confronting mining personnel. In 1966 five villagers were given one month prison sentences for destroying an exploration camp on their land.

By further increasing compensation, obtaining police protection, and in 1970 establishing a Village Relations Office to handle claims, BCL was able to start commercial production at Panguna in 1972. The Administration had granted a 'tailings lease' over the whole Jaba River valley. This permitted them to discharge the open-cast mine's tailings as cheaply as possible by dumping into the Jaba river and its tributary, the Kawerong. The same year Richard West prophetically wrote in River of Tears: The Rise of RTZ, the following now oft-quoted words:

"The excavation, refining and shipping of this ore to the smelters of Japan could bring great profit over the next 20 years to the shareholders of Rio Tinto-Zinc — at the cost of damage to the physical, social and spiritual well-being of Bougainville, which, until the mine came, was a peaceful and prosperous island. Moreover, there is a danger that arguments over the ownership of the mine could cause political strife, even civil war, in this part of the South Pacific."

The Nasiol (Nagovisi), on whose land this tailings 'lease' is located, practise traditional shifting agriculture based on a swidden bush-garden-bush regrowth recycle, with new areas of virgin rainforest being brought under cultivation at longer intervals. Colonial and post-colonial land ownership law — giving them rights only to the surface soil of their land — was seen to be nothing more than "white man's trickery". Nevertheless, some 10,000 hectares of land along the Jaba were alienated from them, valued for compensation purposes at as little as £7 per hectare.

Noxious wastes — including cyanides and heavy metals from the copper and gold concentration process — discharge into the river-system. These have destroyed most marine life in the estuary, where freshwater fish also breed. Because of this, the entire 480 square kilometres tributary system on which more than half of the Nasiol live is essentially devoid of fish. Such is the volume of tailings that in places the river bed has been raised by 40 metres, causing contaminated groundwater to spread into uncompensated lands. As Basil Peutalo of the PNG Catholic Commission for Justice, Peace and Development commented despairingly:

"This ecocide was done without warning, without permission having been asked or granted, and in areas where the inhabitants had thought that they would not be touched by the mining activities. Here is a people who fear that they are no longer in control of their destiny and land. They are losing control of the patrimony of their children. For thousands of years, our ancestors lived out their interconnectedness with the natural world. However, this view of nature and the relationship of the human person with it is challenged today by a spirit of utility which views the earth as property to be used. The huge amount of money that goes with such destructive activities has become an attractive wrapping around the negotiations with local peoples."

The national government's dilemma is that it receives about half the profits (£140 million) from the £700 million value taken out of the mine each year. These are essential for national development. But this worry need not be long term since during the 1990's PNG will become one of the world's foremost gold producers as a stream of new ventures come on stream. For instance, Placer Pacific Ltd is scheduled to produce 800,000 ounces of gold a year over the first six years from their Porgera mine alone. In a nation of over 800 languages and deep cultural and geographical variations, the Government's concern about Bougainville has more to do with precedent over the integrity of the State than with finance.

**Escalation of troubles**

The present troubles escalated when in May 1987 the old executive of the Panguna Landowner's Association was replaced by a more radical new leadership, including one Francis Ona, demanding that the national government should cancel the Mining Agreement with BCL. A £7 billion compensation
claim was put in as a first negotiating pitch to shock the government and BCL into treating the grievance seriously. A spokesman for the landowners said, "What promise can be given to our children that they will believe? They have heard all the promises before and they turned out to be lies. Our children won’t believe any more future promises. Our children won’t listen to us when we say that violence is not the way."

In August 1988, Francis Ona warned that landowner patience was running out. By November he had publicly denounced the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) after stealing explosives from the Panguna mine and declaring that "the only way is for us to shut the mine". Following police clearance of a landowner road block the explosives were used for the sabotag of BCL and later, government property. Powerlines, transportation, the telecommunications station and the international air terminal have since been blown up. By Christmas 1988, the mining operation had been forcibly halted.

The onset of 1989 saw a crisis for the coalition government of Rabbie Namaliu in which PNG troops were for the first time killed in conflict — all the more tragically because it was against their own people. Ona declared outright guerrilla war, proclaiming, "Our land is being polluted, our water is being polluted, the air we breathe is being polluted with dangerous chemicals that are slowly killing us and destroying our land for future generations. Better that we die fighting than to be slowly poisoned."

In July 1989, the security forces thought they had got on top of the situation after destroying the BRA's base in the Battle of Guava Ridge, but Ona was still free and security force allegations of his death reported in the international media are understood to be more accurate.

I passed through Bougainville in late August 1989. Most village people were saying of Ona, in pidgin, "Mi saportim long ofa, mekina long ofa, mekina long ofa, m成都 care centre' or refugee camp in Arawa of all humanity. As Gary Trompf, expert in Papua New Guinea.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES
3. Quoted figures vary. PIM describes a BCL report acknowledging, "a mine pit occupying 400 hectares and proposed pit extensions totalling 1,210 hectares, 300 hectares to waste rock dump which could extend to 550 hectares if the mine is extended 15 years; 3,000 hectares of mine tailings devasting the Kawerong and Jaba river valleys and a 900 hectare delta of discharge tailings in Princess Augusta Bay."

(Maps courtesy of John Connell, University of Sydney)