

# Peace on Bougainville?

## Ceasefire Holds But Rebels Remain Cautious



Bougainville, with a population of only 160,000 has managed to close and keep closed one of the biggest copper mines in the world. Despite having to fight the well armed Papua New Guinea (PNG) army, they have held their ground for 11 years primarily with homemade guns made out of water piping and planks. Thanks to their constant resistance the self described 'ecological revolutionaries' of Bougainville are near to victory- total autonomy.

Bougainville island lies only 7km west from the nearest of the Solomon Islands. Originally colonised by the Dutch, it then fell under German and, after World War I, Australian control. Despite close cultural and geographical links with the Solomon Islands, it was governed as part of Papua New Guinea (320 miles to the west). When PNG was given 'independence' in 1975, Bougainville island was placed under its flag.

### Ecological Destruction

In 1969 CRA, an Australian subsidiary of the British mining giant Rio Tinto Zinc forcibly established a copper mine. From the beginning the island's people resisted. News footage of women fighting with riot cops over survey pegs received international coverage. In Bougainville women are the traditional landowners; land is passed from 'woman to woman'. To put it lightly, on this occasion it was clear their land was not being passed on in the traditional manner. The building of the mine saw 800 villagers landless and another 1,400 without fishing rights as land

was seized and rainforest destroyed. The subsistence life of gardening and fishing was destroyed. 220 hectares of rainforest was poisoned, burned and bulldozed. After 20 years the mine had grown to a huge crater 1/2 km deep and nearly 7km in circumference, creating over a billion tonnes of waste. This was dumped into the Jaba river valley, creating a wall of waste hundreds of metres high, turning one of the islands biggest river systems bright blue.

### Ecological Revolution

In 1988, after two decades of ignored protests, petitions & compensation claims, Bougainvilleans had had enough. A handful of islanders stole company explosives, destroying electricity pylons, buildings and machinery. By using guerrilla tactics they succeeded in closing the mine. Until the war broke out in 1988, the mine accounted for around 45% of all Papua New Guinea's total export earnings. Without these earnings PNG is quickly going bust. Papua New Guinea, with the assistance of Australia, responded by sending in the military. Bougainville



declared itself independent of PNG and Bougainvilleans formed the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) to defend their land and people from further exploitation.

“We wouldn’t stand idle and see our... people being killed so we had to stand up and defend somehow, and it was then that we thought of forming a militant type organisation to contain what the security forces were doing to us.”  
- BRA spokesperson

### 10,000 Dead in Australia’s Secret Vietnam

Since then the governments of Australia and PNG have waged a prolonged and brutal war against the people of Bougainville with the purpose of re-opening the Panguna copper mine and avoiding secession from PNG. The Bougainvilleans are getting no outside aid from any country, and are seriously out-gunned, yet their persistence and jungle strategy has defeated an impressive military machine.

The Australian government claims that it does not support PNG’s war on the people of Bougainville. *It’s lying!* Australia has been funding, arming and directing the PNG military since the beginning. Australia provides PNG with \$32 million in military aid plus much more in untied aid. Over half of the PNG Defence Force has been trained in Australia. Australian military advisors have been on the island directing PNG army operations. Guns and ammunition used by the PNG army are manufactured and/or supplied by Australia. Australian Intelligence advised PNG to enforce a total goods and services blockade of the island, including medical supplies. For the duration of the war no-one was allowed on or off the island. Many of those carrying supplies in or refugees out were killed by the PNG army who maintained a stranglehold around the island thanks to Australian provided patrol boats, speedboats, Iroquois helicopters and Nomad aircraft. Australia thought the Bougainvilleans would crack after ‘3-4 weeks’, yet they held strong for 10 years.

Since the start of the war thanks to massacres and preventable diseases 10,000 people have died - 7% of the population. In an attempt to isolate the Bougainville Revolutionary Army from the civilian population, the military demolished villages and herded the villagers into ‘care centres’(post-Vietnam Newspeak for concentration camps).

“Bougainvilleans agree that environment concerns cannot be disassociated from human concerns. “Environment” encompasses both eco-

logical and cultural rights; the two are often sacrificed side by side. Government tactics such as the forced evictions and populations transfers are part and parcel of development that, in the name of economic growth, justify ecological destruction and the dispossession of peoples. The intent of the perpetrators of this evil war and siege is to create disunity on the islands through suffering and death, to torture us into submission, to steal back the mining resources at the expense of our society and our environment, to own the people and their island.”

-Martin Mirron, Bougainville Peace office (From ‘Bougainville: A Sad and Silent Tragedy in the South Pacific’, *Do or Die* no. 5, p 59)

Australia has many reasons for trying to destroy the Bougainville rebellion. The main reasons are it’s industrial and geo-political interests. The Rio Tinto Zinc subsidiary that owned the mine is Australian and the the resistance on Bougainville could serious-



*The volcano Mt. Bagana lies in BRA territory in the centre of the island. On Bougainville it’s not just the people who are active.*



ly weaken Australia's hold on the region. As mentioned above, from 1918 to 1975 (with a brief interruption during World War II) PNG was under colonial occupation by Australia. PNG became an 'independent' state in 1975 and was shaped by Australia as a power block between it and the evolving regional superpower—Indonesia (See page XXX). PNG's western-sponsored elite's control of its own population is very unstable. PNG is not welded together by a common language or culture, but is still mainly tribal. Many have declared their wish to, as a common saying goes, 'do a Bougainville'. The PNG military has been weakened greatly by the loss of the revenue from the mine, and if the BRA are successful it would almost definitely trigger similar struggles for self-rule on the mainland and in the region in general. In such a situation the PNG military could simply collapse. Indonesia (which is already in forced occupation of neighbouring West Papua- see page XXX) would probably take advantage of the power vacuum and invade PNG. This would seriously weaken Australian power in the region.

### "Your Darkest Hour Has Arrived"

The war continued for 10 years with the people of Bougainville experiencing the most degrading violations: murder, torture, beatings and rape by the Papua New Guinea Defence Force and its pro-PNG 'Resistance Force'. Australian-supplied phosphorus bombs exploded in the villages. When fragments of these bombs made contact with the skin, they created wounds which did not heal. Especially with the blockade preventing access to medicines. The wounds went gangrenous, limbs dropped off, many died. When BRA representatives turned up for peace talks in '95, they were fired on by PNG troops. Every year brought another massive PNG invasion. Every year the Bougainvilleans won against the odds. In May '96 the biggest operation to date was heralded by the PNG Prime Minister with the televised message "*Your Darkest Hour Has Arrived*" (see Order 2133 box above). Hundreds of soldiers smashed through the Jungle destroying villages- only to be driven back into the sea through it's own controlled territory. The Bougainvillean combination of determination and luck won the day. It was



### Order 2133 PNG Defence Force 21/5/96

"Search for the rebels and kill them... Any civilians who are suspected of harbouring the BRA must be killed without question... Get the rebels out. Do not leave any of them, but wipe them out... Destroy all food - gardens, houses and any shelter found in the jungle, clean it up... Any civilian found to be an ordinary civilian is to be forced into care centres. If anyone is disorderly they must be beaten."

becoming increasingly obvious that the Australian backed PNG army could not defeat the BRA- they needed help.

### British Mercenaries and National Crisis

In January 1997, the PNG government hired the London based mercenaries, Sandline International, to contain and neutralise the BRA (a euphemism for kill, maim and murder the people of Bougainville). The name may jog the memory of many British readers as it was Sandline who were implicated in the same year in the British government 'Arms to Sierra Leone' scandal. Consisting of some of the best trained and armed elite troops in the world Sandline (see 'Achieving an Executive Outcome' box on following page) promised in its contract to:

"In particular provide personnel and related services and equipment to conduct offensive operations in Bougainville in conjunction with PNG Defence Forces to render the BRA militarily ineffective and repossess the mine."

Sandline imported two attack helicopters, two troop carrying helicopters, six rocket launchers, one hundred AK-47s, ten rocket-propelled grenade launchers and smoke/fragmentation grenades. News began to seep out about British and South African mercenaries training PNG forces with night-fighting equipment. Journalists who approached the 15,000 hectare compound on PNG were detained and their cameras taken. Meanwhile 500 miles away back on the



## Achieving an Executive Outcome...

Since its formation in 1989, Executive Outcomes(EO)/Sandline has fielded a force of over 500 elite soldiers, mostly under the command of white South African officers. They're based at Plaza, 107 Ltd in Kings Road, Chelsea, London. They are led by Ed Barlow, the ex-head of the South African Army's 'political assassination and torture wing'. EO/Sandline soldiers remain, as they were before the end of Apartheid, at the forefront of counter-revolutionary warfare. A UNESCO report on EO's activities in Sierra Leone accused them of performing "all kinds of illegal acts" in their pursuit of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). EO soldiers fired on civilians from helicopters and used fuel air explosives (the next stage up from Napalm) to burn entire forest areas - and everyone in them.

A report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (in *London Review of Books* 26/2/97) identifies EO as an organisation whose "biggest operations so far have been in countries with valuable mineral resources". EO is part of large corporate umbrella group with close associates being involved in private security, air charter, and mining amongst other things. Or as the Observer put it;

"Executive Outcomes' mercenaries are not simply 'guns for hire'. They are the advance guard for major business interests engaged in a latter day scramble for the mineral wealth of Africa."

Dr Smith from the Centre for Defence Studies at Kings College, London, says companies such as EO often operate in a triangle of interests- their fees being paid directly or indirectly by large multinational corporations, and these corporations in turn receive mining, logging or other resource concessions from the government. Sandline/EO itself is financially linked to a mining company. It can wipe out the rebels then harvest the profit. This is what it was planning in Bougainville. When the BRA closed the mine, they found maps of five other mineral deposits on the island. "We truly believe that all of Bougainville is under threat of destruction by these mining corporations", said BRA leader Francis Ona. Throughout most of the war the BRA's best supply of weapons has been from captured PNG soldiers. When asked what he thought about the collapse of the Sandline operation one BRA fighter replied, "The mercenaries had better weapons. By now we could have rocket-launchers, mortars, AK-47s."

island, Bougainvilleans used to the reality of being machine gunned from helicopters and rained on by shells braced themselves for an attack. What happened next surprised everyone.

In March '97 PNG suffered what commentators described as its biggest ever crisis. Riots and looting rocked the capital Port Moresby. Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan was forced by the military to resign and the British/South African mercenaries, their mission abandoned, retreated across the airport tarmac under the eyes of locals waving banners saying 'Piss Off'.

It had started when the by now public contract with Sandline was criticised by the PNG army Brigadier Jerry Singirok, many of whose own troops hadn't been paid for months. He demanded Sandline be expelled and the Prime Minister resign. On his orders troops put the Sandline mercenaries under arrest. The cabinet quickly sacked him but the damage had been done.

At 9am the following morning, a crowd gathered outside the Head Quarters of the PNG Army. It quickly swelled in size to about 3,000. The troops ordered to release the mercenaries refused, claiming loyalty to their sacked leader. Police tried to stop the crowd marching on parliament to deliver a petition, who jeered a cabinet delegation sent to collect it and then went wild. An afternoon of rioting and looting followed. With the nation unravelling and the military no longer allied to the Prime Minister he resigned after being openly threatened by the rebel army faction. After a week of imprisonment the mercenaries were sent packing with the exception of Colonel Tim Spicer, who was later released thanks to the British High Commissioner who paid his bail.

The people of Bougainville and the BRA, who a few weeks beforehand were facing an assault of unprecedented magnitude, were in a state of cautious celebration. Their opponents, the PNG government and its defence forces, had proven to be their own worst enemies. Once again Bougainville's luck was in.

## Fragile Peace

After the Sandline crisis, despite years of war murder and oppression the Bougainvilleans were left in a position of great strength and their enemies in one of relative weakness. In July 1997, from this position of strength the Bougainvillians initiated a peace process.

On 30 April 1998, a cease-fire agreement was signed. It was agreed that an unarmed UN Peace Monitoring Group would participate that included



New Zealand, Fijian, Vanuatuan and (ominously) Australian troops.

In August 1998, a Pan Bougainville Leaders Congress was held involving the traditional chiefs as well as representatives of the women of Bougainville. The Pan Bougainville Congress believed that:

“The people of Bougainville are united in their common aspiration for an independent homeland’ and called for the ‘Government of Papua New Guinea to give the people of Bougainville, as a matter of principle, the chance to exercise their individual and collective rights to self-determination.”

Elections were held in May 1999 for a new Bougainville Peoples Congress (BPC) and Joseph Kabui, former vice-president of the BRA-linked Bougainville Interim Government, was elected President with an overwhelming majority of 77 votes out of a 101 member Congress. His nearest rival, the PNG backed former Premier of the puppet Bougainville Transitional Government, Gerard Sinato, only received 10 votes.

Unsurprisingly PNG and New Zealand tried to subvert the whole process. Shortly before the elections in April, New Zealand invited a group of Bougainville leaders over for a ‘study tour’. Once there, the leaders were confronted with a new ‘agreement’ to sign in the presence of the current Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea. The Bougainvilleans were not prepared and some signed the document. The Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) withdrew from the discussions and did not sign.

As part of the cease-fire agreement the BRA continues to hold onto their weapons but (usually) they do not carry them. To disarm while the war could still restart would be madness. One lesson revolutionary movements around the globe have learnt is never give up your guns and never disband people’s militias. PNG unsurprisingly have reneged so far on their side of the bargain by not starting a phased withdrawal of its forces.

### **Splits in the Revolutionary Army?**

Although the Western press has reported a split in the BRA between leaders Sam Kauno and Francis Ona (and their respective advisers and supporters) this position attempts to sensationalise and simplify a complex situation. Both so-called factions are united in their quest for Bougainville’s independence. From the outset, Francis Ona as the then leader of the



*The BRA’s guns were made from water piping (for the barrels) and planks (for the butts) taken from the mine. Their lathes are powered by coconut oil, as are their vehicles. ‘Green Technology’ does have a future after all! For more practical info, see page xxx.*

Bougainville Interim Government refused to join the peace process and refused to disarm whilst PNG Defence forces still occupy Bougainville and before Bougainville gained her independence. More recently, he has refused the offer of 5 member seats within the Bougainville Peoples Congress. However, apart from a show of arms to preserve their claimed territory—the declared no-go zone in centre of the island including the mine—the Francis Ona faction has not resorted to the use of arms during the peace process. The Sam Kauno faction remain committed to the peace process although they have not ruled out a return to arms if PNG reneges on the terms of the Cease Fire Agreement, especially in relation to the



### **"We Will Close Gold Mine!" say Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army**

It looks like indigenous people in the neighbouring Solomon Islands might be 'doing a Bougainville'. Fighting and the apparent birth of a new armed resistance group this June is threatening the running of the Australian run Ross Mining NL Gold Ridge gold mine. The mine was opened late last year after being bitterly opposed by the indigenous people. In what looks like a re-run of the beginning of the Bougainville war during unprecedented civil unrest the newly formed Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA) declared that they will close the gold mine. The conflict has just opened up and the GRA's motivations are unclear. The BRA says it has no combatants fighting with the GRA.

withdrawal of PNG defence forces. In some respects Francis Ona's position has been vindicated by PNG's intransigence on the issue of withdrawing its troops. The government of Papua New Guinea continues to state that its troops cannot be withdrawn (although they are confined to barracks) until civil authority has been established and that 'Independence is non-negotiable', as the PNG constitution does not allow it. Independence, both from PNG and from the rule of the global elite, has been the goal of the Bougainville people ever since the corporate machine tried to suck Bougainvillean into itself in 1969.

### **"The Future is Before Us and the Struggle Continues"**

Freedom remains some way off. The path towards autonomy has forced open warfare on the people of Bougainville. The effort now is to secure a settlement and rebuild the island communities ravaged by the war, oppression from Papua New Guinea and mineral exploitation. The people of Bougainville remain hopeful and optimistic while guarded about the possible pitfalls awaiting them.

Although foreign aid programs are being implemented around the island, the bulk of the aid is being directed towards the northern section of the largest island and the northern tip island of Buka. This is a blatant attempt to placate revolutionary sentiments among the historically more developed sectors of Bougainville and build an anti-independence vote. Already there are leaders within the Buka community saying they don't want independence from PNG. The success of their struggle has been thanks largely to the Bougainvilleans absolute determination. It has

also been thanks to their position in the world. On the periphery of the global economic order they have successfully pushed back the machine's tentacles, fighting in a largely undestroyed mountainous jungle ecology hospitable to guerrilla activity.

A surprising number of peoples on the global periphery, like the BRA in Bougainville or the Jungle Commando Maroons of Surinam have succeeded in facing off the invasion of their land by industrial exploitation. Many of these peoples fight with such tenacity because in subsuming themselves to industry they have everything to lose and nothing to gain. The Bougainvillean culture of forest gardening and fishing, where women are the 'landowners' is an organic one. It has grown within, not against the ecology they call home. They have fought against the industrial machine and for their *small scale* ecological society. This is their strength. From the Russian Green Armys and the Spanish anarchist peasants of Aragon to the Indigenous Zapatistas of Mexico (see page XXX), people immersed in the land, in ecological culture, have always been the prime fighters in the struggle between community and capitalism.

***"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 out the very heart of our existence."***

While other peoples have been fooled by the crushing feelings of cultural inferiority the global economy perpetuates they have stood firm in defence of their culture. Yet the war and now the peace has forced on them changes. Among others a national process of decision making, of government. Though the population and landmass is small this move away from the local as the arena of power is very dangerous. The history of rebellion is too full of liberators who turn into jailors, of radicals who gain power and become turncoats. The small size of Bougainville and its lack of industry/urban culture means it is inherently less likely to transform into a class ridden society. The Bougainvillean resolve to never let mining restart is the greatest guard against this process. The Francis Ona led BRA faction is standing strong by keeping a no-go zone around the mine. Having defeated the PNG army time after time what new social forms will Bougainvilleans come up with? In 1992 the people of Panguna, where the mine site is situated declared:

**"We now understand and have seen with our own eyes the destructive effects of the copper**



mine operations on our land, our environment, our society and our culture. The mine will remain closed for the rest of our lives.”

Despite all manner of horrors they kept that promise. In Spring this year the Director of Bougainville Copper Limited said in a public hearing in Melbourne:

“Although I, personally, and none of my staff have been to the mine site, we get a fair amount of intelligence. People do go there, particularly from the church, and reports are that almost everything has been destroyed one way or another, either deliberately, through deterioration, theft or whatever.”

Today the forest has begun to reclaim the mine site as its own. Many thousands of lives have been lost as a result of this mine. But through their determination, the people of Bougainville have stopped Rio Tinto, the largest mining company in the world, from further despoilation of their land.

## Bougainville And Us

The struggle of the people of Bougainville is not just some distant cause to support, we can learn a lot from them. They show us that against the odds, resistance is possible, even victory. The Bougainvilleans started off using non-violent tactics. They were viciously beaten. To defeat a powerful enemy and defend their land and community they made the decision to turn to armed struggle. We are a long way off from that situation, but one day we too may be faced with that question. Bougainville also shows us what the elite's reaction would be if we began to really threaten them and build a truly ecological counter-culture.

Bougainville deserves our solidarity. As mentioned above foreign aid is being funnelled to some communities to breed disunity. After a decade of war, Bougainville is in desperate need of basic things like medical supplies. It is up to us in anarchist and radical ecological movements around the world to provide that support. No one else will.

When news of the '96 military sweep (see Order 2133 box) came to us three years ago activists in Britain organised a blockade of the Australian Embassy. The threat of action got the Embassy closed for the day so

instead 60 people invaded Rio Tinto Zinc's headquarters and paint bombed it. In '97 when the mercenaries were sent over we did an action against the Papua New Guinea Embassy. Both actions got wide press coverage. Nothing gets the Australian Press attention more than the Poms calling them murderers. It is possible that war might break out again. If that happens we need to act fast. We will need to target the offices of Australian and Papua New Guinean interests in Britain and around the world. Our individual actions may be small but together global solidarity can have a real effect.

Against the odds Bougainvilleans have managed to hold their ground. It's up to us to carry out the vital work of taking their struggle global. Let's pull together and support Bougainville!

## What You can Do

### Educate Yourself

\*Background information and regular updates can be found on <http://www.eco-action.org/bv/>

\*Read *Plunder* edited by Roger Moody (Partizans), 200 pages, £6.95 Available from AK Press (See page XXX). This great book is co-written by communities all around the globe fighting the mining giant RTZ. It's the most comprehensive account of one corporations destruction and oppression.

\*Get on the Australian Bougainville Freedom Movements E-mail news list by sending your address to: [vjohn@uts.edu.au](mailto:vjohn@uts.edu.au)

\*See 'Bougainville: A Sad and Silent Tragedy in the South Pacific', *Do or Die* 5 p59

\*Organise a Bougainville talk/filmshow in your town. Contact the Brighton address below for speakers and help.

### Get on the Network

\*Subscribe to the Bougainville Freedom Movement's magazine: *Garumut* Send (Australian) \$20 in cash with your return address to: Bougainville Freedom Movement, PO Box 134, Erskineville NSW Au 2043 Ph: 61 2 9558 2730

### Take Action

\*If you or your group are interested in actions in Britain send your details to BFM, c/o South Downs EFL, Prior House, Tilbury Place, Brighton, E.Sussex or phone pager 0336-760424

\*If you live outside Britain contact the Australian address above.

### Raise Money

\*Cash for medical aid, clothing, radios etc is desperately needed both for humanitarian reasons and to strengthen the more militant communities on the island- countering the opposite process being carried out by foreign charities. Organise a benefit gig, do a collection at your next meeting. What ever you can send do. Even a few pounds can make a real difference. All money you send will be used for aid only and will go straight to the BRA heartlands. Send cash in Australian dollars to the Oz Bougainville Freedom Movement address above. If sending more than \$50 you should do a cash transfer through a bank to the following account. 'Bougainville Freedom Movement 2212 - 1002 - 9038, Commonwealth Bank, Newton Branch, Sydney Australia.' Send the BFM a letter to inform them the your money transfer was to be used for aid.