

# The Bougainville Crisis:

## A South Pacific Crofters' War

*Alastair McIntosh*

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 Bougainvillians 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,

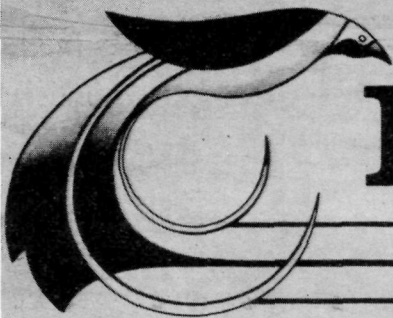
having lost the 17% of national revenue which came from the mine, were forced to devalue the kina by 10% in January.

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 being a commons, 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, Levvers 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




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### Back from the Battle of Buka

WAR-weary soldiers, their eyes reflecting the memory of last week's "Battle of Buka" in which four of their comrades died, march off the tarmac at Port Moresby's Jackson's Airport behind the caskets bearing the bodies of their dead.

Many of them are wounded and limping. Their commanding officer, Tau Solomon (in foreground), has his head strapped with a thick white bandage, covering shotgun pellets still lodged in his skull.

For Angwi Hriehwazi's full report of Friday's emotional homecoming, and three more deaths, turn to Page 2.

— Picture by HARRY KOMBEGA.

Val Duncan, chairman of Rio Tinto-Zinc, was to describe in 1969 as "the jewel in our crown".<sup>1</sup> 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".<sup>2</sup>

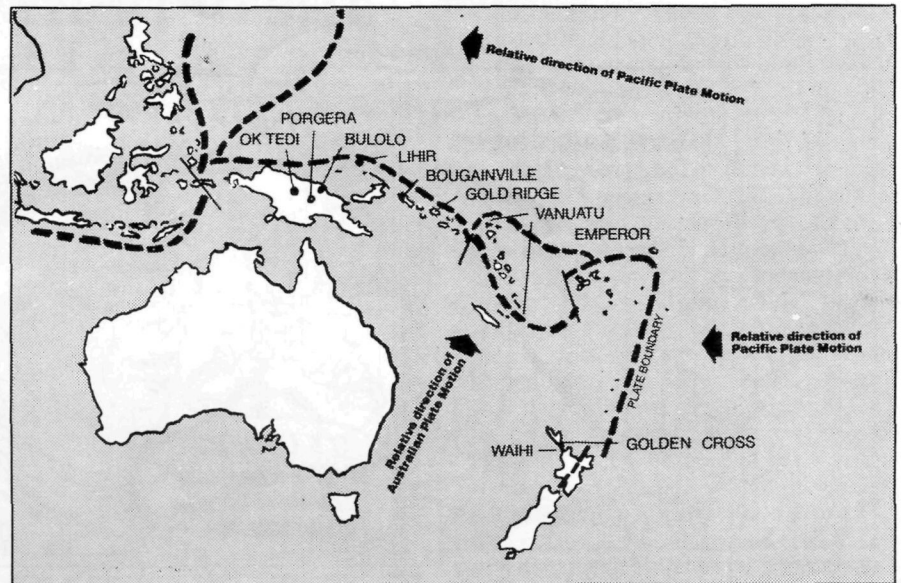
To deaf ears of colonial administrators seeking to build a resource base for future national development, the landowners pointed out that copper would not rot in the ground. They wanted it to stay there for another twenty years until their children were educated and could better decide what was in their 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:

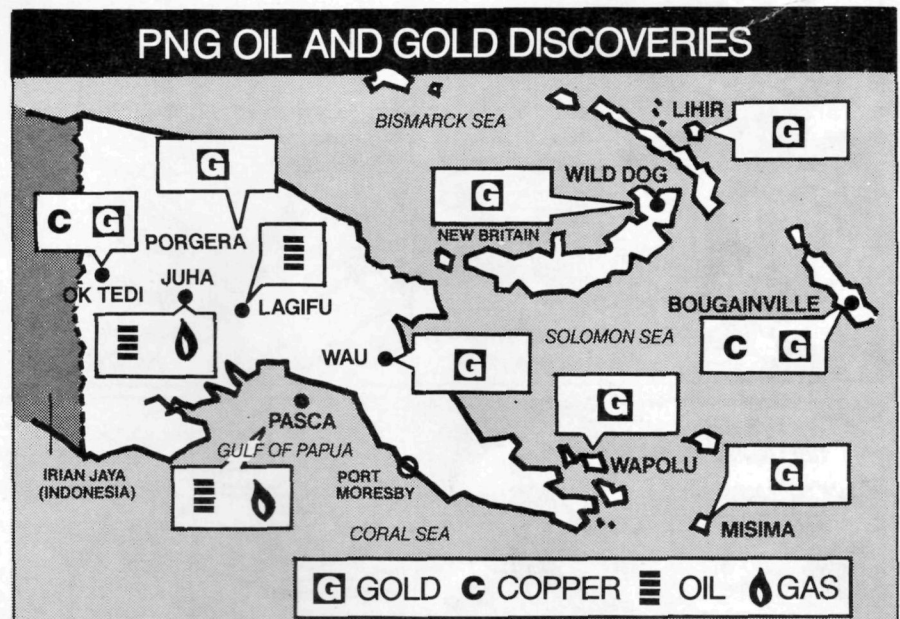
"The excavation, refining and shipping of this ore to the smelters of Japan could bring great profit over the next 20 years to the shareholders of Rio Tinto-Zinc — at the cost of damage to the physical, social and spiritual well-being of Bougainville, which; until the mine came, was a peaceful and prosperous 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 Nasioi (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.<sup>3</sup>

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 Nasioi 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 Commis-



Tectonic movements have made the West Pacific's volcanic "Rim of Fire" rich in minerals



Other potential 'Bougainvilles' abound as PNG discovers its mineral wealth

sion 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."<sup>4</sup>

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

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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."<sup>5</sup>

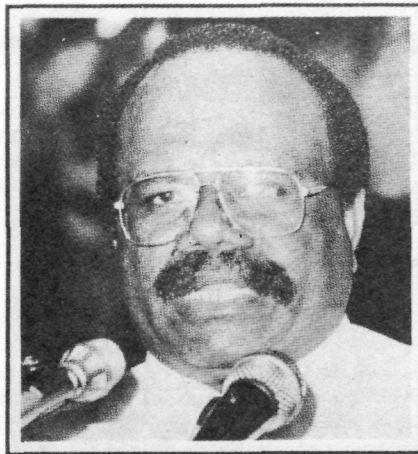
In August 1988, Francis Ona warned that landowner patience was running out. By November he had established the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) after stealing explosives from the Panguna mine and declaring that "the only way is for us to shut the mine".<sup>6</sup> Following police clearance of a landowner road block the explosives were used for the sabotage 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."<sup>5</sup>

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 misinformation.

I passed through Bougainville in late August 1989. Most village people were saying of Ona, in Pidgin, "Mi saportim long tingting tasol" — I support him in thought, but not in deed. A soldier told me how from June to August their orders had been to check every village house to ensure that each had a resident man. Where there was none, it was to be assumed he was away fighting, the house was burned and the family sent down to the 'care centre' or refugee camp in Arawa where some 4,000 people are temporarily settled in plastic tents. He said most of the soldiers were "sori tru" about the task on hand. They looked forward to the day when army engineers could return as promised to rebuild burnt villages, where official estimates acknowledge 1,600 houses destroyed. Reported atrocities had been more the fault of the police riot squad than the army. He personally had not seen any killings. His rifle, like many, had the butt inscribed with felt pen: 'Satanic Verses' and 'Rambo Hammer' were typical names. This contrasted in a uniquely Melanesian way with the conviviality of betel nut chewing, colourful tee shirts worn under fatigues, and some men wandering around hand in hand with each other, rifles slung under the spare arm.

Neither side has gained from the violence and if the scars do not re-open they will certainly have difficulty healing. One can sym-



Rabbie Namaliu, Prime Minister of PNG

pathise with both the militants and the Government; the latter, to their credit, having not used force alone but have tried everything from massively increased compensation offers to traditional peace-making ceremonies. Namaliu is widely held to be a decent man and his Minister for Justice, Bernard Narakobi, is internationally recognised as a leading human rights lawyer. Press freedom has been maintained throughout the crisis, making it easy for Amnesty International to monitor the situation and gain front page local media coverage on expressing concern at the brutality of war's time-honoured excesses. All this has fostered a climate leading to the involvement of international conflict-resolution mediators in the recent ceasefire agreement. It involves withdrawal of the security forces by March 16th 1990, submission of arms by the BRA, and closes with the plea, "May God Bless our undertaking"<sup>6</sup> — a clause poignantly heartfelt in its stark sincerity.

Melanesia's equivalent of our Crofters' Wars may, in the light of national interest, be a less clear-cut case of oppression than was evident in Scotland 100-150 years ago with the Highland Clearances. Yet, in a subtle way, similar forces are at work which, as Basil Peutalo suggests, disrupt the values of human-centred societies and replaces them with a system where economic performance becomes the main yardstick of ontological worth. Promoting human fulfilment through the psychological-displacement pursuit of unbridled resource-consumption carries a cost against culture, nature and relationships which leads to the spiritual impoverishment of all humanity. As Gary Trompf, expert in Melanesian world views at the University of Sydney, told me recently, "I think we are seeing in this last grab for mining, logging and fishing resources the start of the Malthu-

sian flashpoint — the period Thomas Malthus predicted when our growth and greed would outstrip the Earth's carrying capacity. Here, in the remotest corner of the world, the full forces of Mammon are ripping through the few cultures left which could teach us something about sustainable living."

Melanesian thinker, Utula Samana, already sees hopeful signs of our learning from one another. He writes, "We must impart the knowledge of total life. The Melanesian person's whole livelihood is part of nature. I think the citizens in the West who are fighting for the quality of the environment — the Greenies (sic) — and those of us who are defining and practising a Melanesian model of development can come to terms in finding a path that can help humankind's survival. In the curricula of our educational institutions we need to emphasise the science of human ecology rather than the science of economics."<sup>7</sup> As premier of Morobe Province, Samana successfully put this into practice by encouraging organic farming, appropriate technology, and conscientisation workshops . . . leading towards the PNG constitutional objective of integrated human development.

Various grass roots development organisations throughout the region are increasingly seeking an understanding of how to 'conscientise' people — help them to reflect on what whole life in a whole world is perhaps about and how to change oppressive circumstances which militate against human fulfilment. For instance, the Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT) is having dramatic success in helping village people to understand what different forms of 'development' mean, so that they do not say 'yes' to the companies and their political lackeys before thinking through the consequences or ensuring safeguards. As a result, the pace of industrial logging has been greatly slowed, to the chagrin of corrupt officials.

But conscientisation is not just a prescription for the South. Our need is greater in the affluent North. Bougainville serves as a tragic reminder that we must use natural resources only with a responsibility appropriate to their true costs. As black poet Alice Walker so pertinently says, "We alone can devalue gold by *not* caring if it falls or rises in the marketplace . . . Feathers, shells and sea-shaped stones are all as rare. This could be our revolution: to love what is plentiful as much as what is scarce."<sup>8</sup>

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1989.
2. *Islands Business*, August, 1989.
3. Quoted figures vary. *PIM*<sup>1</sup> describes a BCL report acknowledging, "a mine pit occupying 400 hectares and proposed pit extensions totalling 1,210 hectares; 300 hectares of waste rock dumps, which could extend to 550 hectares if the mine is extended 15 years; 3,000 hectares of mine tailings devastating the Kawerong and Jaba river valleys and a 900 hectare delta of discharge tailings in Princess Augusta Bay."
4. Paper delivered by Basil Peutalo to the Tripartite Consultation of the Melanesian, Indonesian & Australian Council of Churches, PNG, 18th August 1989.
5. *The Times of PNG*, 23rd August 1989.
6. *Niugini Nius*, 2nd March 1990.
7. *PNG: Which Way?*, Utula Samana, Arena, Australia, 1988.
8. *Horses make a landscape look more beautiful*, Alice Walker, Women's Press, UK, 1985.

(Maps courtesy of John Connell, University of Sydney)