

Unit 26: A Pot of Gold- Take It or Leave It: The Bougainville Crisis in Papua

Sanni Eleadona

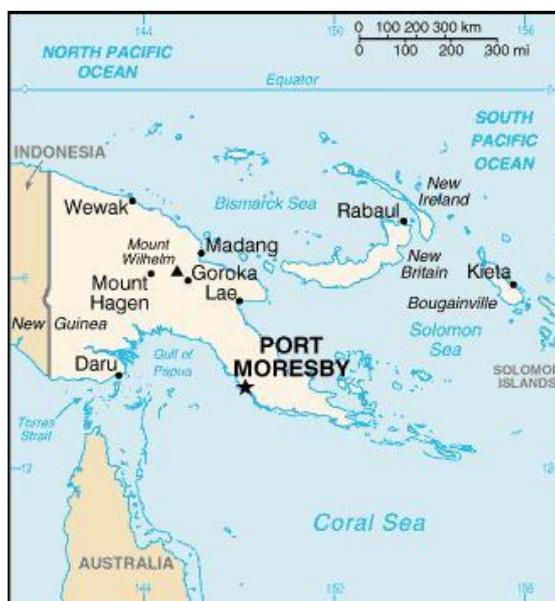


Figure 26.1 Map of Papua New Guinea

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- Knowledge of the historical issues and events relevant to the outbreak, course and aftermath of the Bougainville Crisis
- An ability to analyse and evaluate the main issues of the Bougainville Crisis
- An appreciation of the social, political and economic changes to society as a result of the Crisis
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Glossary

Alienated land:	Land that is owned by someone else, usually by the Government
BRA:	Bougainville Revolutionary Army
Customary land:	Land that is held under a customary or traditional system of tenure, ie indigenous land
Guerrilla forces:	A group of small, independent bands of soldiers which harass the enemy by surprise raids and attacks on communications and supply lines
Sabotage:	Malicious damage to work tools, machinery or equipment to make them useless
Secession:	Formal withdrawal from an alliance or association, or the breaking away of part of a nation to form a new nation

What have been the causes and implications of the Bougainville Crisis?

In the 1960s, the peaceful life of the Guava Villagers was disrupted by the construction of a giant copper mine by Bougainville Copper Limited. The mining angered the landowners people of that area, and triggering what became known as the 'Bougainville Crisis'

In order to understand the reasons for the Bougainville Crisis, it is important to consider Bougainville's geographic location. Bougainville is separate from the rest of PNG. It is located at the northern end of the Solomon Islands, and often takes the name North Solomon's.

The Bougainvilleans' skin colour is one of the purest black on earth. They refer to brown skinned people from elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, on the mainland, as 'redskins'.

What are different types of land ownership in Papua New Guinea?

Land is crucial to the people of Papua New Guinea, as it is absolutely essential for their survival. As one villager said in 1967, losing land is like taking ‘the bones out of a man’s legs; the man will not be able to walk’ (quoted in S. Dorney, *Papua New Guinea*, 1990: 117).

In PNG, 97% of land is customary land which is held under a Customary System of tenure. That is, absolute ownership of land is vested in a group of clan. Rights are transferred to descendants usually by word of mouth. In PNG, custom plays a very important part in land rights. Only 3% of PNG’s land is alienated land. Very often the alienated land is owned by the government. This includes urban areas (cities and towns), government stations, missions and plantations.

However, customary landowners still dispute the government’s rights over alienated land such as mining sites.

What triggered the ‘Bougainville Crisis’?

Bougainvillean Pepetua Serero, and her first cousin Francis Ona, are two key players in the Bougainville Crisis. Serero was a broadcast officer with the Administration radio station in Bougainville, and Frances Ona joined Bougainville Copper Limited several years later as a surveyor. Like their parents and many other Bougainvilleans, they were suspicious of outsiders.

Serero and Ona grew up at Guava village in the Crown Prince Range, on Bougainville in the 1950s and 1960s. They were attending Catholic Mission schools run by the Marist order when the company *ConZinc Rio Tinto Australian Exploration* (CRA) began drilling in the Panguna area near Guava in 1964. Their people vigorously opposed the construction of the mine. Many Bougainvilleans feared the Administration and foreign companies and did not trust them. Their fears were confirmed when in 1969 a company called Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) began construction of a giant copper mine in Panguna.

The Panguna mine is what is called an ‘open-cut’ mine. These mines are dug deeper and deeper until all the metal-bearing rock has been removed. Panguna was one of the largest open-cut mines in the world. The anger of Serero and Ona grew as the open-cut pit deepened and more of their land was washed away as waste down the Java River. Their deep grievance over what had happened at Panguna during the previous twenty years led Serero and Ona into launching a passionate and violent confrontation with the PNG National Government in 1988.

The conflict worsened in 1989 when many lives were lost. These events shook the fragile unity of all 19 provinces of the new nation of PNG.

Questions and Activities

1. In your own words, explain the meaning of 'customary' and 'alienated' land
2. Why were Serero and Ona suspicious of outsiders?
3. What role did they play in the Bougainville Crisis?
4. Create a timeline of events that took place between 1969 and 1989 in Bougainville

What happened in Bougainville between 1987 and 1989?

In August 1987, Serero and Ona called a meeting of landowners and Panguna. Serero became the chairperson of the new Panguna Landowners Association and Ona its general secretary. The new committee demanded half the profits made by the BCL since the mine began production in compensation (K10 billion) and tighter controls on environment damage.

In November 1988, Ona walked out of a meeting with the BCL and the National Government. He was furious at the findings of an independent study by a New Zealand firm of environmental consultants which stated that the Jaba River was not poisoned. Ona pointed out that the landowners knew fish were dying.

He resigned his job and went into the jungle. A few days later, guerrillas from what was to become the Bougainville Revolutionary Arms (BRA) attacked the BCL mine and stole explosives. Sabotage and arson followed.

The guerrillas attacked equipment and buildings around the mine and blaster a power pylon off its legs, severing transmission lines between the Loholo power station on the east coast, and the mine in the mountains. Soon after repair teams restored power, the guerrillas blew down another two pylons. The supervisor of the sabotage was a former PNG defence force soldier, Samuels Kauona. He had returned home in late 1988 after extensive demolitions training with the Australian Army. Kauona deserted the PNG defence force on his return to become Ona's right-hand and military advisor.

What role did Kauona's guerrilla forces play in the Bougainville Crisis?

Guerrilla warfare

Kauona was not a landowner from any of the BCL lease areas. His village was in the nearby Kongara area at the head of the Bovo Valley. This valley is at the rear of the town of Arawa, a coastal town of 10,000 residents that BCL built on what was formerly a coconut plantation. Kauona became skilled at using the media and issued statements, with Ona as the spokesperson. Kauona's guerrilla forces were initially fewer than one hundred and operated in small bands. They conducted hit-and-run raids against the mine and Government installations such as telecommunications towers. The Police and Army sent to Bougainville by the National Government found Kauona a formidable foe. Following terrorist attacks on mine employees, the guerrillas succeeded in shutting down the mine on 15 May 1989.

The PNG National Government tried to solve the problem in its early stages, but the crisis only escalated. The Justice Minister, regarded it as a clash between traditional and modern values, between modern law and traditional law and between the modern economy and the subsistence economy.

Two weeks later the soldiers were pulled back from the jungle and told only to guard the mine and other installations. The Government in Port Moresby decided that the rebels had been hit, and it was time for peace talks.

However, the situation deteriorated in March 1989, with a series of ethnic killings. On 11 September 1989, North Solomon's Member of Parliament John Bika was assassinated by the BRA. Bika had headed a Provincial Committee that rejected full independence, and asked for more local power within PNG. The BRA did not like this because they wanted to turn the mine dispute into a war for independence.

Although the war in Bougainville stopped, the 'Bougainville Crisis' was to continue for the next nine years, with many losses and hardship for the local villagers.

Jungle war in Bougainville

The machine gun hammers away. It shatters the morning quiet. Bullets tear through the foliage 150 metres away on the other shoulder of the saddle-shaped ridge. One soldier claims he can see the entrance to a rebel tunnel. Two others crouch and fire their grenade launchers. The first shot is off target, but the second lobs into the suspected cave entrance and explodes with a thump. The patrol has been in Bougainville jungle for seven days. They have no prisoners. The soldiers file up on to the Guava Ridge, where there is a network of shallow trenches. These overlook the mine pit and were used by the BRA a few weeks earlier in one of the few confrontations of the campaign that was anything like a pitched battle. Soldiers from 'A' company had taken the ridge after six hours ... we are on the offensive.

Figure 26.2. Description of a jungle war in Bougainville in late July 1989 by an Australian journalist

Questions

- 5 Who built the network of trenches?
- 6 What is a "pitched battle"?
- 7 What is an "offensive"?
- 8 What is the journalist suggesting by saying "They have no prisoners"?

How successful were the peace negotiations between the villagers and the Government?

Several peace initiatives were carried out, but all came to a standstill.

In 1997, a British mercenary organisation, Sandline International, was invited to PNG to help solve the crisis by secretly infiltrating Bougainville and killing rebel leaders. When this deal was revealed to

the public, riots and looting followed the dismissal of PNG Defence Force Commander Brigadier-General Jerry Singirok. Prime Minister Julius Chan later suspended the agreement with Sandline International, and the mercenaries were deported.

More peace talks began in 1998, with the help of New Zealand. The New Zealand Government played a vital role in this process, and this time, the peace talks were successful. By May, the PNG government and the BRA, as well as international observers had witnessed the signing of the Arawa Agreement. This meant that the Bougainville Crisis was really over. More than 1,000 people lost their lives. A protest against a copper mine had evolved into a nine year long rebellion.

Follow-up activity;

What were the consequences of the Crisis in Bougainville?

What are relations like now between Bougainville and Papua New Guinea?

What has happened in Bougainville between 1990 and 2010? Create a timeline of key events.

Check the many internet sites on this topic.

Watch documentaries made on the crisis in Bougainville.