

Winning the War, Losing the Peace: Ecological Revolution Flounders on Bougainville

Various Authors

2003

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With a population of only 160,000 Bougainville has managed to close and keep closed one of the biggest copper mines in the world. Despite having to fight the Australian-armed Papua New Guinea (PNG) army, they have held their ground for twelve years with home made guns made out of water piping and planks, scavenged mine trucks and petrol made from coconuts.

In 1969 a RTZ plc copper mine was forcibly established. From the beginning the people resisted. News footage of women fighting with riot cops over survey pegs received international coverage. In Bougainville women are the traditional landholders; land is passed from woman to woman. On this occasion it was clear their land was not being passed on in the traditional manner.

The building of the mine made 800 villagers landless and another 1,400 without fishing rights as land was seized and 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 crater half a kilometre deep and nearly 7km in circumference. Over a billion tonnes of waste 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.

After ignored protests, petitions and legal claims the 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 PNG's total export earnings. Without these earnings PNG is going bust. PNG, with the assistance of Australia, responded by sending in the military. State soldiers strafed villages from helicopters. The Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) was formed to defend the land and people from further exploitation. Ten years of war followed.

PNG herded people into 'care centres' (concentration camps) and enforced a medical blockade on the island. 10,000 Bougainvilleans died in the conflict. Despite being heavily outgunned the BRA succeeded in keeping the mine closed. They pushed the state soldiers off most of their island and forced a peace. The land of the mine is slowly regenerating. The people have returned to their age-old subsistence agriculture.

Unfortunately the people who originated the revolution – the people local to the destruction and with the most to lose – have now become isolated from the rest of Bougainvilleans. Most of the others seem to want to re-open the mine and instigate other developments, The locals are holed up in their mountain stronghold.

Francis Ona, the instigator of the original revolution, is vilified by the mainstream press and virtually all communication with the rest of the world is controlled by the prodevelopment lobby. Ona's group, the Me'ekamui Defence Force, (MDF) have about fifty armed people to defend the site of the mine, and the BRA now stand in opposition to them, with about a thousand.

Recently the BRA tried to remove a MDF roadblock barring foreigners passage to the mine, killing some of the defenders. All the NGOs who once supported the struggle against colonialism now seem to see nothing wrong with what they call the 'peace process' and are slagging off Ona and his people, who are ultimately the ones whose decision about their land should be final. There are lessons to be learned here about both NGOs and 'nationalist' struggles (not to mention 'peace' processes), and the wisdom of co-operating with those who hold views antipathetic to our own.

Very little news comes out at all from the MDF; the little that does is hopelessly mangled by corporate lackey journalists. Unsurprisingly, Ona doesn't trust outsiders, and particularly not journalists. He hasn't been interviewed in the 6 years since the BRA won the war, until recently. In

that interview, after being accused of having no connection with the Bougainville peace process, he said:

“I never have any no connection with the peace process on Bougainville. You know, peace on Bougainville is always here, yeah, but what they are trying to import on Bougainville is trying to... economise peace, you know, they want to put money into the process and then try to... I see it as a psychological warfare on Bougainville, yeah.”

Papua New Guinea has most graciously agreed to allow Bougainville a referendum on independence in ten years time, but Ona says there's no reason to wait. Bougainville can go it alone. “I don't know why ten years...” he says. “Right now we can have a referendum. Bougainvilleans through the last 14 years have proven that we can look after ourselves.”

Francis Ona has literally stuck to his guns. His men remain heavily armed, untouched by the 'disarmament process' (the BRA and foreign interferers still have guns...) which they've rejected. At the roadblock, the MDF exchanged fire with the BRA as recently as March this year. Ona says “It's really a violation of the peace process on Bougainville... I've got a paper here which proves that the UN and PNG has planned all this. You know, it's written here.” He asked the fuckwit journalist to take the paper but was ignored.

In spite of the situation, the MDF appear confident. “The outside input into Bougainville has destroyed our people's lives. We've gone through fourteen years without money and we still exist.” As with all people who are truly resisting the onslaught of civilisation, it's hard to know what we can do in the west in solidarity with them. It seems that anything we do to undermine civilisation here will be more useful than trying to get through the maze of disinformation put up by the 'human rights' and development organisations.

There is an international spokesperson for the MDF, Clive Porabou, working out of PNG. Typically, he has support only from a few individuals; the cowardly NGOs go along with the oppressors.

To get news out and gather support for the struggle the MDF need to get their transmitter repaired.

If you can help to fund new communications equipment (even just a few quid will help), contact GA and we can put you in touch with them. See P.14 for addresses.

The Panguna landowners' story shows that there is really no point in working with such organisations. These are the enemies of freedom as much as the more obvious ones are.

Desire for Freedom: MDF Statement, 26 Sep 2003

From the South to the Northern tip of Bougainville there is a growing “restlessness” for freedom and that freedom is total Independence. In Central Bougainville No Go Zone where Inter-Government Relations Minister sir Peter Barter focus his attention, Francis Ona and his Me'ekamui National council and the Me'ekamui Defence force have no right to stop people from seeking medical assistance or joining the imported peace.

Even in the peace areas there are Me'ekamui Hardliners with Me'ekamui basic aims and principal, Independence. Me'ekamui Defence Force are not the party to weapons disposal, those are BRA A company who joined the peace process the same people who signed the petition. The

road block at Morgen junction will remain. Bougainvilleans go in and out of the No Go Zone areas freely but outsiders are not allow.

No Go Zone does not prevents people from proper service, assistance and medical treatment but it is helping them to keep their birth right. Me'ekamui Goverment and its Millitary Arm [MDF] is not disrupting the peace process, why blame the Me'ekamui Government?

Bougainville peace is from time immemorable, long live peace on Bougainville.

Clive Porabou, MDF Spokeperson

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Retrieved on January 1, 2005 from www.greenanarchist.org
from *Green Anarchist* #70, Autumn 2003

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