

Papua New Guinea government rules out independence for Bougainville

Peter Byrne, Peter Symonds
16 October 1999

The Papua New Guinea (PNG) government headed by Prime Minister Mekere Morauta last week offered a limited autonomy package to the Bougainville province putting further pressure on the separatist Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) to accept PNG sovereignty. Announcing the offer, Bougainville Affairs Minister and former prime minister Michael Somare said the critical areas of foreign affairs, defence and police would stay within the control of the central government. Somare has set a deadline of December 25 for Bougainville's politicians to draft a new provincial constitution within the framework of the national constitution.

The announcement came just prior to a two-day visit by Australian Prime Minister John Howard who, after a briefing from Mekere and Somare, promptly described the proposal as “extremely encouraging”. “He [Somare] seems optimistic that an understanding could be reached around something that preserved the integrity of PNG but gave the Bougainvilleans a reasonable degree of local autonomy, which in a way is the solution,” he said. Australia has 250 troops on Bougainville island. They form the major component of a regional Peace Monitoring Group put in place as part of a ceasefire arrangement to halt the protracted war with BRA guerrillas.

Bougainville People's Congress (BPG) chairman and BRA leader Joseph Kabui said this week that the BRA had so far accepted the offer for greater autonomy, describing it as an important step towards total independence. He said that the BRA would co-operate with other parties to ensure that a legitimate authority for Bougainville was established under the autonomy arrangement. Kabui added, however, that the BRA would only fully disarm when the government agreed to a referendum on independence for Bougainville.

The former prime minister Bill Skate, while acting in a caretaker role, signed an agreement to hold a referendum on Bougainville independence—a position which he has

reiterated as opposition leader. But Mekere, who replaced Skate on July 14, has ruled out any such vote, stating that Bougainville should remain part of PNG. On assuming office, he identified the resolution of the Bougainville conflict as one of his top priorities.

The friendly relations between Howard and Mekere during the visit reflect close ties between Australia, the former colonial power in PNG, and the new prime minister, who is a former central bank governor and businessman. In the period leading up to Skate's resignation, Australian ministers along with sections of big business were pushing for his replacement by Mekere. Mekere has pledged to mend relations with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, by implementing austerity measures and further opening up of the economy to foreign investors.

Howard announced that Australia would provide \$US80 million in bridging finance to PNG to prop up its economy until the Mekere government is able to sign new agreements with the IMF. He also signed a new aid package between Australian and PNG, which had previously been held up by lengthy negotiations over its terms. Skate, who undoubtedly is well aware of the Australian government's role in his removal, initially refused to meet with Howard until the venue was changed to the PNG parliament building.

The war on Bougainville erupted in 1989 after a dispute over royalties between local landowners and RTZ-CRA, the British-Australian corporation, that owns the giant Panguna copper mine. At various stages in the bitter war, Australian governments have backed attempts by the PNG Defence Force to crush BRA rebels, trained PNG troops and supplied equipment, including helicopter gunships. It also supported the PNG's blockade of Bougainville, which left the islanders without food, medicines and other basic goods.

A decade of war and economic blockade claimed up to

20,000 lives and led to the complete breakdown of Bougainville services and basic infrastructure. Education is one example. There are now only three high schools in Bougainville with an annual intake of just 240 students from a total population of 160,000. The ages of high school students range from 12 up to 25 because a whole generation had virtually no schooling as a result of the war.

The new autonomy proposal is the latest step in a process of negotiation, which began after the so-called Sandline Affair in early 1997. The PNG government headed by the then prime minister Julius Chan attempted to achieve a definite military victory over the BRA by hiring the services of Sandline International, a mercenary outfit based in Britain and South Africa.

Chan's secret arrangement cut across plans by the Australian government to reach a negotiated deal with the BRA to end the war and reopen the Panguna mine. Not only was Canberra doubtful of its success after the repeated failure of the PNG Defence Force to crush the BRA, but the hiring of Sandline revealed an independence on the part of Chan that it was not willing to tolerate.

Details were leaked to the Australian press, provoking a political crisis in Port Moresby, which eventually forced Chan to abandon the plan and step down, pending an inquiry into the financial arrangements involved in the Sandline deal. Chan lost his seat in the subsequent national elections and the new Skate government fell into line with the attempts by Australia and New Zealand to effect a political settlement to the war.

In July 1997, BRA leaders along with other Bougainville politicians met at the Burnham military base in New Zealand and agreed to a ceasefire. A further meeting in January 1998 at New Zealand's Lincoln University, formalised an agreement that included the withdrawal of all PNG Defence Forces from Bougainville and their replacement by a Peace Monitoring Group, consisting of troops from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Vanuatu.

The Lincoln Agreement also called for the formation of an elected Bougainville Reconciliation Government (BRG) by the end of 1998. The draft BRG constitution made concessions to the separatists by referring to "an act of self-determination by the people". But the BRG elections ran into opposition in the PNG parliament and a legal challenge was mounted to the government's suspension of the previous provincial government. Sections of the PNG ruling elite were concerned that any degree of independence for Bougainville would lead to

similar demands in other areas of the country which contains an estimated 700 language or "wantok" tribal groupings.

Elections scheduled for April this year were cancelled at the last minute. Then, in May, a chaotic election was held to establish a Bougainville People's Congress (BPC), which was established despite boycotts by a number of Bougainville groupings. The court challenge failed and Joseph Kabui, former BRA deputy leader won the BPC presidency.

Kabui's guarded acceptance of the government's latest autonomy offer further undermines the BRA's position. The BRA leaders continue to demand a vote on independence, the withdrawal of PNG security forces and the establishment of a native Bougainville police force, insisting that these demands were contained within the Lincoln Agreement. But the autonomy deal effectively relegates these proposals to the indeterminate future.

Kabui and other BRA leaders responsible for negotiating the Lincoln Agreement are under some pressure from a breakaway faction led by Francis Ona, who refused to participate in the so-called peace process. Ona, who still has control of the area around the Panguna copper mine, continues to insist on full Bougainville independence.

No doubt the BRA leadership is also considering the implications of recent events in East Timor and calculating the possibilities of encouraging Australia, New Zealand or one of the other major powers to intervene on its behalf to force the PNG government to hold a referendum. Like the CNRT in East Timor, the perspective of the BRA is to offer Bougainville to international investors as a base within the region as well as for the exploitation of its minerals and other resources. Such hopes received a setback with Howard's endorsement of the PNG government's autonomy offer.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact