

Bougainville autonomy talks to resume

Peter Byrne, Tim Joy
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Talks on the future status of the resource-rich Papua New Guinea island of Bougainville will resume this week following a meeting earlier this month between Bougainville leaders and the relevant PNG minister.

A joint media statement issued by the new PNG Minister for Bougainville Affairs Moi Avei and Bougainville politicians, including the provincial Governor John Momis and Bougainville Peoples Congress president Joseph Kabui, expressed “confidence in reaching an agreement on Referendum and Autonomy for Bougainville”.

Momis and Kabui stated: “We can see the signs of a real breakthrough on the referendum issue that resulted from a willingness of both sides to compromise in the interests of peace. We are looking forward to the next round of talks with genuine hope.”

Precisely what the “compromise” may be is not entirely clear, but the leaders will convene on January 26, after a meeting of technical officers on January 22.

These moves follow the breakdown of talks at the end of last year. Despite negotiations dating back to mid-1997, and a new series of discussions during 2000, the “final round” of meetings was adjourned at the start of December. The Bougainville representatives left the talks claiming that the government had done a “back flip” on a promise to hold a referendum on independence.

At that stage, Momis and Kabui warned that the secessionist Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) would resume armed resistance unless the government agreed to an independence ballot.

The deal now under discussion is likely to involve the transfer of powers to an expanded provincial government, with some form of referendum to ratify the arrangement. Kabui, an ex-BRA commander, recently called for Bougainville to become “a nation within a nation”. He has reportedly demanded that Bougainville have its own police force and judiciary,

and powers over international trade, currency, taxation and immigration. It appears that Kabui would only leave some foreign affairs and defence powers in the hands of the PNG government.

Last November, the *National* reported a source close to the Bougainville delegation stating that such arrangements could undercut those in the BRA who are seeking a secession ballot. “They [the delegation] feel that if they get some or all of these powers, the question of a referendum on complete independence might fade away in the minds of the real militants among them,” the source was quoted as saying.

The renewed bid to strike a deal follows the signing of the Loloata Understanding last March, which canvassed the possibility of an independence referendum. It stated: “The National Government acknowledges the aspirations for a binding referendum on independence as called for by the Bougainvillean leaders. The parties reaffirm their support for a progressive political settlement that takes account of, among other things, the wishes of the people of Bougainville.”

Bougainville leaders, who claimed they had obtained a commitment from the PNG government to hold an independence referendum, hailed this evasive formulation as a breakthrough. As part of the deal, a provincial government was re-established on Bougainville, with Momis, a provincial member of parliament, as Governor. Kabui's Bougainville Peoples Congress, set up as part of earlier negotiations to form a transitional government, agreed to back the provincial government.

Last September, however, PNG Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta ruled out any secession. “Although the word ‘referendum’ has come to be used in some circles as a form of short-hand for a binding referendum on a separate independence for Bougainville, let me make clear that the Government's

(and, I believe, the entire Parliament's) position for national sovereignty, unity and independence—and against secession—remains,” he declared.

In December Kabui and Momis appealed to Australia and New Zealand “to play a much more active role to break the deadlock in these talks”. Later that month, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer visited Bougainville and Port Moresby, the PNG capital, as part of a trip that also included New Zealand, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. After meeting with various Bougainville factional leaders, Downer claimed that he had made proposals to overcome the stalemate. He said he was “very pleased with the progress of the discussions,” but refused to provide details, saying it was a matter for the PNG government and the Bougainville leaders.

Between 1989 and 1997, governments in Australia, the former colonial power, supported, armed and trained the PNG military as it fought an eight-year war against the BRA, as a result of which 20,000 people, or 1 in 8 Bougainvilleans, were killed. The Hawke and Keating Labor governments were intent on reopening the British/Australian Rio Tinto-owned Panguna copper mine, then one of the largest copper and gold mines in the world. Local landowners, led by former mine employee Francis Ona, had seized the mine, demanding higher royalty payments, and later formed the BRA in response to the PNG military's brutal retaliation.

The PNG armed forces failed to crush the BRA, however, forcing Australia and New Zealand to shift their stance and push for a settlement. A mid-1997 ceasefire agreement led to the deployment of an Australian-led peacekeeping force, with the perspective of brokering a deal that would protect the regional powers' economic and strategic interests and ultimately allow the Panguna mine to re-open. As well as supplying almost 300 troops, the Howard government in Canberra is now funding port and road-building projects designed to open up the island to the world market.

A group led by Ona still controls the area around the Panguna mine and has remained outside the negotiations. Other sections of the BRA have joined the talks, but remain divided, resulting in fighting last year between different factions from south and central Bougainville. Throughout last year the PNG government, Momis and Kabui repeatedly stated that

any agreement would require Ona's participation, but they may now be seeking to reach a settlement without him.

The basic perspective of the various Bougainville faction leaders, regardless of whether it takes the form of secession or autonomy, is to carve out their own territorial power base and take a cut of the super-profits being sought by the multinationals. By appealing for support from Australia and New Zealand, Momis and Kabui only underscored their readiness to serve as local partners in meeting the requirements of the transnational mining houses and other companies.

For its part, the PNG government, under pressure from Australia, is anxious to secure an agreement, but it is also wary that if it grants too many concessions this will set a precedent for other parts of PNG, which contains more than 800 tribal and language groups. In recent months Morauta's government has been in sharp conflict with provincial governments and landowning groups in the Southern Highlands, Western and Enga provinces, which contain the country's biggest remaining revenue-earners—the oil and gas fields, and the giant Ok Tedi and Porgera gold and copper mines.

Despite Morauta's insistence on the “national sovereignty, unity and independence” of PNG, the country is highly fragile. The army is riddled with divisions and unrest, foreign investment is at an all-time low, extensive poverty and unemployment have produced rampant law and order problems and political instability constantly threatens the government. This month the local currency, the kina, fell to a two-year low of 29 US cents.



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