

Australian-sponsored Bougainville settlement breaks down

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27 March 2001

Talks arranged by the Australian government to finalise a settlement between the Papuan New Guinea government and pro- and anti-secessionist factions on the island of Bougainville broke down on February 27, despite Canberra's considerable efforts to secure an agreement.

It was the second time in recent months that the Australian government has unsuccessfully flown in the leaders of warring groups from the near Pacific region to spend a week together at the Garbutt Air Force base in the northern Australian city of Townsville. The outcome of the first exercise—the signing of a disarmament pact in the Solomon Islands—has since collapsed and the Bougainville negotiations appear to be heading in the same direction.

The failure of the Bougainville gathering indicates that none of the basic conflicts between the various groups have been resolved, despite January's Kokopo agreement, which saw the PNG government, under sharp Australian pressure, commit itself to holding a referendum in 10-15 years time on Bougainville's future status.

The airforce base talks were meant to hammer out the conditions for complete disarmament and weapons disposal—which the PNG government has insisted must take place before it will move an amendment to the PNG constitution to allow for the referendum. Passage of the required constitutional amendment is highly uncertain, requiring a two-thirds majority in the PNG parliament, which the government of Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta has shut down until July to avoid a no-confidence motion.

The Townsville negotiations were also supposed to clarify the powers of a more autonomous provincial government. Under the Kokopo pact, the PNG administration promised to establish such a

government, but there was no agreement on the degree of autonomy. In order to win support for the deal on Bougainville, the Bougainville factions have called for extensive self-government, including their own public service, police and prisons.

Some 100 leaders of the secessionist Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), the pro-PNG Bougainville Resistance Forces (BRF) and Francis Ona's Meekamui Defence Force (MDF) participated in the Townsville talks. Ona previously headed the BRA, which conducted a guerrilla war between 1989 and 1997 initially for increased royalties from the giant British/Australian-owned Panguna gold and copper mine. His faction still controls the area around the mine. It was the first time that the MDF had joined negotiations but Ona did not attend personally.

The talks were considered so sensitive that the media was banned from the air force base and none of the Bougainville representatives were permitted to make press statements during the course of the discussions. Despite these precautions, some media reports pointed to basic disagreements.

According to the PNG *Independent*, Ona's MDF called for the withdrawal of the PNG army and Australian-led peace monitoring troops before agreeing to disarm. By contrast, the pro-government BRF insisted on the complete destruction of weapons, while other leaders proposed placing weapons in sealed containers to be guarded by peace monitoring troops.

One Australian newspaper report indicated that another BRA faction leader, Sam Kaouna, has demanded that the proposed referendum be incorporated into a constitutional amendment before any disarmament. By another account, John Momis, PNG's Bougainville governor, said disagreement remained over the powers of a proposed autonomous

government.

What is clear is that the collapse of the negotiations was an embarrassment to Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer, who had declared the talks a success just four days earlier. It is another serious setback for Australian policy in the region, where the PNG government recently faced a military rebellion, a military-installed government rules Fiji and the tensions remain high in West Papua, East Timor and throughout the Indonesian archipelago.

Not only did Downer fly to Townsville personally to meet the Bougainville leaders, but Australia was represented at the talks by its PNG High Commissioner Nick Warner and members of the Australian-dominated Peace Monitoring Group. PNG National Planning and Bougainville Affairs Minister Moi Avei headed his government's delegation.

In a further push by the PNG and Australian governments to secure a deal, Bougainville and PNG leaders, joined by UN officials, attended talks in the PNG capital Port Moresby from March 9. Two days later, Prime Minister Morauta issued a statement insisting that “a workable and effective plan for weapons disposal must be concluded and implemented before elections are held for the Bougainville autonomous government”.

Media reports suggested that the PNG government literally locked the Bougainville delegates in a hotel, insisting they could not leave until there was an agreement. After more than two weeks, the talks are reportedly still continuing. Neither the PNG government nor the media have made clear whether Ona's group is even in attendance, an important requirement for any final deal.

PNG newspapers reported that further talks would be convened in Arawa, near the Panguna mine, at the end of March. The PNG government evidently hopes that by convening a signing ceremony in Arawa, near Ona's stronghold, Ona's group may be induced to attend. In another attempt to stitch up a settlement, the head of the United Nations Observer Mission, Noel Sinclair, is holding discussions on Bougainville.

The Australian government saw the Townsville conference as crucial in keeping the Kokopo agreement alive. In January, Downer travelled to Port Moresby and Bougainville for meetings with PNG politicians and leaders of all the Bougainville factions in order to

push personally for the signing of the Kokopo document.

By calling for a referendum on possible secession, the Kokopo pact represented a further shift in Australia's policy toward its former colony, PNG. Between 1989 and 1997, Australian governments conducted a dirty war against Bougainville's people. They sent arms and military personnel to assist the PNG army fight the BRA, and helped enforce an economic and medical blockade of the island, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 20,000 Bougainvilleans—one-eighth of the total population.

When the PNG military nevertheless suffered heavy losses and eventually proved unable to defeat the BRA, Australia increasingly adopted a new tack, seeking negotiations with the BRA in the hope of ultimately reopening the Panguna mine. This policy switch was strengthened after the PNG government attempted to fly in Sandline mercenaries to fight the BRA, sparking a revolt by the PNG military. Australia, along with New Zealand, brokered a 1997 ceasefire, which provided for a 293-member Peace Monitoring Group—mostly Australian troops. Over three years later, the central issues remained unresolved.

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[22 March 2001]



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