

Papua New Guinea government obtains shaky weapons disposal pact in Bougainville

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Under pressure from the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government and Australia, the former colonial ruler, some of the factional leaders on the mineral-rich PNG island of Bougainville signed an agreement on weapons disposal earlier this month.

Disarmament has long been a sticking point in talks between the PNG government, the government-backed Bougainville Resistance Force (BRF) and various factions of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), which fought an eight-year war for secession from PNG.

The PNG government of Sir Mekere Morauta had demanded that a weapons pact be signed before any further discussion on promised autonomy for Bougainville and an eventual referendum on independence.

In January, at Australian insistence, Mekere's government abandoned PNG's longstanding opposition to Bougainville separatism and signed the Kokopo agreement. In return for the Bougainville groups promising to disarm, it provided for autonomy, to be followed by vote on secession in 10-15 years, subject to the PNG parliament passing a constitutional amendment to permit a breakaway. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer made several visits to PNG to push for the agreement.

But conflicts over the timing of weapon disposal and the extent of autonomy led to the breakdown of week-long talks in the northern Australian city of Townsville at the end of February. The BRA insisted that it would keep its weapons until after an autonomous government was elected. The PNG government and the BRF were adamant that all guns be handed over before elections.

In May, the Australian and New Zealand-dominated Peace Monitoring Group organised for 40 ex-combatants from Bougainville and neighbouring Buka Island to be airlifted by helicopter to Togarau village, in the Rotokas Mountains, for the latest talks. However, one BRA faction, Francis Ona's Meekamui Defence Force, refused to attend.

After four days, during which BRA representatives initially raised differences, the participants signed the Rotokas Record, setting out three stages of disarmament.

During the first, PNG military forces and Police Mobile Units will leave areas once combatants agree to come in from the jungle and hand in their weapons to their unit commanders at a container site.

Secondly, the United Nations Observer Mission on Bougainville, a five-person supervisory team led by Guyanan diplomat Noel Sinclair, will secure the weapons under its supervision. Only then will the PNG government introduce the constitutional amendment.

Finally, within 18 weeks of the amendment passing, the parties must meet to verify that the handing-in has been exhaustive. If this hurdle is overcome, the UN Mission will set a date for elections.

Ona's absence underscores the fragility of the arrangement. His forces have remained in control of the areas around the giant Rio Tinto-owned Panguna copper mine, which they seized in 1989. In a May 15 media statement, Morauta asked Ona and his supporters "for their understanding and co-operation in getting the guns out of Bougainville for the sake of lasting peace".

New Zealand's High Commissioner in PNG, Nigel Moore, commented that disarmament is "very difficult because clearly many in the BRA believe their weapons are their last bargaining chip and they are reluctant to see them handed in until they're confident about the political outcome".

The key to the participation of other BRA factions might lie in remarks made by Bougainville Provincial Governor John Momis in January, when he discussed how the BRA leadership could be won over.

"It is important for the governments of Bougainville and Papua New Guinea to embark on strategies to persuade the hard-liners, the BRA, to surrender their arms. That means involving them in socio-economic development," he said.

Momis argued that the ex-combatants could be drawn together as owners of small-scale farming businesses: "Maybe we should look at starting business ventures where both Resistance (BRF) and BRA, enemies during the crisis, can work together. Those are the things that we will be vigorously pursuing. That is why it is important to get the

money-making ventures going, to replace guns with axes, with bush knives, to get the people to start work again on their copra.”

This economic model counts on using the village people of Bougainville as cheap labour for indigenous business empires, linked to overseas companies. Plans are underway for the North Solomons province, encompassing Bougainville and Buka, to be declared a Free Trade Zone province by August. As well, Deputy Prime Minister and Forests Minister Michael Ogio, who recently attempted to give a Malaysian logging company tax exemptions worth millions of kina, has reiterated his interest in setting up a similar project in his electorate in North Bougainville.

The war on Bougainville initially erupted in 1989 over the demands of landowners for higher royalties from Rio Tinto, a British-Australian mining giant. Unable to negotiate a bigger payout, some of the landowners, led by Ona, seized the Panguna mine. In response to PNG military attacks, they formed the BRA, which grew into an island-wide guerrilla force fighting for independence from PNG.

Until 1997, Australian governments assisted the PNG government in its war against the BRA, supplying arms and military personnel and enforcing an economic and medical blockade of the island. An estimated 20,000 Bougainvilleans—one-eighth of the total population—died because of the war and blockade.

When the PNG military proved unable to crush the rebels, the Australian government switched its position in 1997 to demand a negotiated settlement. Under a January 1998 ceasefire agreement signed in New Zealand, the Australian military supplied most of the 300-strong Peace Monitoring Group. In the wake of the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis and growing political instability throughout the region, Canberra stepped up its efforts to obtain a long-term settlement.

The PNG government is also anxious to resolve the Bougainville issue, which has become a symbol of PNG's chronic instability. The country's small ruling elite depends heavily on mining and petroleum projects that account for an estimated 29 percent of Gross Domestic Product, 75 percent of export earnings and almost 17 percent of taxation revenues. This economic base is under threat. A *Resource Stocks* magazine survey of sovereign risk for mining companies ranked PNG near the bottom for the year 2000, and mining exploration this year is expected to total only \$US15 million.

PNG Chamber of Mines and Petroleum executive director Greg Anderson has predicted a further decline in exploration and described the situation as the worst in 15 years. Chamber president Dr Moseley Moramoro has warned that, “we are likely to see the demise of the industry in 10 to 12

years time”.

A Bougainville settlement is by no means assured, however. Major differences still exist on the extent of autonomy, with talks due this week on the outstanding issues. PNG's Bougainville Affairs Minister Moi Avei recently stated that Bougainville could have its own public service but described defence, police and prison services as “very sensitive areas” that required further discussion.

In a media statement issued in Canberra, Downer welcomed the Rotokas pact and declared: “We look forward to the early conclusion of a final political settlement on Bougainville.” Nevertheless, he admitted: “There of course remain many difficult issues to resolve.”

Moreover, parliamentary instability in PNG has already thrown the agreement into doubt. Morauta's Peoples Democratic Movement, having just gained a parliamentary majority in its own right, has ousted its coalition partner, the National Alliance, from ministerial positions. Avei was dumped as Planning and Monitoring Minister but seems to have remained as Bougainville Affairs Minister. Bougainville Peoples Congress president Joseph Kabui and deputy governor Gerald Sinato have warned that Avei's sacking could derail the whole process.

Given the unpredictability of PNG politics, there is no certainty that the Bougainville constitutional amendment will receive the necessary two-thirds majority when parliament is reconvened in July. In fact, there is no guarantee that Morauta will survive as Prime Minister. He only narrowly escaped a no-confidence motion late last year before shutting parliament down for eight months.



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