

## **Bougainville (Papua New Guinea) 1988-1998**

### **Executive Summary**

Bougainville is an island province in PNG and the site of one of the world's largest gold and copper mines. From 1988 to 1998, the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) waged a civil war in Papua New Guinea (PNG), resulting in an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 military and civilian deaths.<sup>1</sup> The Bougainville mine, operated by Bougainville Copper Ltd., accounts for around 40 percent of PNG's exports. Papua New Guinea achieved independence in 1975, and though the government has remained democratic, it has been dysfunctional. What little national identity or government legitimacy that existed in PNG in the 1980s was fragile and declining.<sup>2</sup> In 1988 a group of Bougainvilleans demanded 10 billion kina (10 billion USD) for the land and resources used by the mine. Led by Francis Ona, the group that would become the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) destroyed BCL property with explosives and demanded the closure of the mine. The violent and undisciplined response from the Papua New Guinea Defense Force (PNGDF), the national military of PNG, incited ethno-nationalism. This precipitated the expansion of BRA objectives from the mine to Bougainville secession from PNG. The PNGDF had become increasingly involved in domestic affairs, with PNG experiencing widespread criminal activity and civil unrest. These events weakened the PNGDF's discipline and capability, and they were unable to contain the BRA. The BRA established the Bougainville Interim Government (BIG) in 1990, but they were ill-suited to governing, and government services on the island ceased to exist. Violence committed by the undisciplined and loosely organized BRA motivated armed opposition on the island, known as "the Resistance," which the PNGDF actively assisted. Both sides committed human rights abuses. After several aborted peace initiatives and military defeats for the PNGDF, the government engaged the private military contractor Sandline in 1997.<sup>3</sup> The commander of the PNGDF subsequently denounced the contract and ordered Sandline contractors detained and deported.<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, this schism in civil-military relations resulted in new PNG government leadership that successfully negotiated an end to the conflict and autonomy for Bougainville in 1998.<sup>5</sup>

### **Assessing the 5 Factors**

#### **1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a "nation"?**

---

<sup>1</sup> "Bougainville: The Peace Process and Beyond." Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. Parliament of Australia, September 27, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> May, Ron. *State and Society in Papua New Guinea: The First Twenty-Five Years*. s.l.: ANU Press, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Regan, Anthony J. "Causes and Course of the Bougainville Conflict." *The Journal of Pacific History* 33, no. 3 (November 1998): 269–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223349808572878>.

<sup>4</sup> May, Ron. "The PNGDF in Troubled Times." *State and Society in Papua New Guinea*

<sup>5</sup> Regan, Anthony J. "Causes and Course of the Bougainville Conflict."

No, in 1988 national identity had largely failed to materialize and was declining. While PNG has had some success at creating a national identity since independence in 1975, PNG is one of the most culturally heterogeneous places in the world, and dynamics more closely resemble local communalism.<sup>6,7</sup>

**2. Was the government seen by roughly 85 percent of the population as legitimately in power?**

No. Although PNG has had a functional democratic government since independence, the government has been characterized by repeated votes of no confidence, a large number of constantly shifting political parties, and the corrupt use of political offices. The resulting widespread cynicism in the legitimacy of the central government resulted in devolution to civic organization around local communities. This, in turn, motivated localized demands for additional compensation for land purchased by the government and served as a justification for criminal gang activity.<sup>8</sup>

**3. Did the government in power at the start of the conflict maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the overall population of the country?**

No. Although the conflict in Bougainville included only a small subset of the population, broader internal security was declining in 1988. Widespread criminal activity resulted in multiple declarations of states of emergency in different parts of PNG, including in the capital, Port Moresby.<sup>9</sup>

**4. Did the insurgents have external sanctuary to a militarily significant degree?**

No, Bougainville is an island. Though there were some cases of BRA fighters taking refuge in the neighboring Solomon Islands, the PNGDF mostly maintained a naval blockade of the island.<sup>10</sup>

**5. Was there an army or armed constabulary/gendarmerie force in existence at the start of the conflict which was self-sustaining (salaries and equipment paid on a regular basis, etc) and which was reasonably competent?**

Yes, reasonably competent but not without significant challenges, which were exacerbated by the conflict in Bougainville. The PNGDF was repeatedly far outspending its budget (and unable to maintain some basic logistics), and PNGDF tension with civilian oversight resulted in insubordination by military leadership in multiple cases.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> May, Ron. "Introduction: Papua New Guinea at Twenty-Five." *State and Society in Papua New Guinea*.

<sup>7</sup> Simet, Jacob, and Wari Iamo. *Cultural Diversity and the United Papua New Guinea*. Boroko, Papua New Guinea: National Research Institute, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> May, Ron. "From Promise to Crisis: a Political Economy of Papua New Guinea." *State and Society in Papua New Guinea*.

<sup>9</sup> May, Ron. "Challenging the State." *State and Society in Papua New Guinea*.

<sup>10</sup> Regan, Anthony J. "Causes and Course of the Bougainville Conflict."

<sup>11</sup> May, Ron. "The PNGDF in Troubled Times." *State and Society in Papua New Guinea*.

## Outcome

Government loss. Bougainville was granted autonomy but not independence from PNG, and parts of Bougainville remain “no-go areas” for the PNG government.<sup>12</sup> The eventual peace process was more a result of war weariness than government military successes. The PNG withdrawal of government services and the inability of the BIG to govern effectively resulted in many civilian deaths by disease, starvation, and random violence.<sup>13,14</sup> In 2019 Bougainville held an independence referendum and overwhelmingly voted in favor of independence.<sup>15</sup> As of July 2021, full independence is expected by 2027. As the outcome is the anticipated creation of a new breakaway country, the PNG government must be considered to have lost the conflict. This outcome ultimately supports the theory of the five factors.

---

<sup>12</sup> Uppsala Conflict Data Program. “UCDP: Papua New Guinea: Bougainville.” Accessed June 23, 2021. <https://ucdp.uu.se/conflict/369>.

<sup>13</sup> Dunn, Leah, John Braithwaite, Hilary Charlesworth, and Peter Reddy. “Descent into Civil War.” *Reconciliation and Architectures of Commitment: Sequencing peace in Bougainville*. Canberra: ANU Press, 2010. <http://www.oapen.org/download?type=document&docid=459490>.

<sup>14</sup> Regan, Anthony J. “Causes and Course of the Bougainville Conflict.”

<sup>15</sup> Westerman, Ashley. “Trying To Form The World’s Newest Country, Bougainville Has A Road Ahead.” NPR.org, December 30, 2019.

<https://www.npr.org/2019/12/30/789697304/trying-to-form-the-worlds-newest-country-bougainville-has-a-road-ahead>.