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Bougainville - The long struggle for freedom

By Moses and Rikha Havini

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Young freedom fighter from the Bougainville Revolutionary Army with home made shotgun stands guard over the Panguna copper mine.
photo: Francis O'Neill, April 1994

In the 18th and 19th centuries the European colonial powers embarked upon a splurge of colonisation within the Asia-Pacific rim. The imperialists were after and are still after today, the raw materials and natural resources of the Pacific countries. The indigenous peoples of the region were and are the victims. The French fableist La Fontaine wrote in 1668: "those who enjoy power always arrange matters so as to give their tyranny an appearance of justice." (British Imperialism, Winks, p 1) He could have had in mind the great powers and the privileges these nations and their TNCs are revelling in today.

First contacts with the West

One of the first contacts by western explorers with the Solomons/Bougainville region goes back to 1568. In that year the Spanish seaman Captain Alvara de Mendana set foot on the shores of the Solomon Islands. He thought he had discovered the source of the mythical "King Solomon's mines" in the Solomons Archipelago. The region was seen as a potential source of plunder, principally for gold and any other interesting finds for the "motherland". Mendana returned to the Solomons again in 1594 but took ill and died there.

A relatively long period without contact with the West was next broken by another European visitor, the French sailor, Captain Louis de Bougainville in 1768. He contacted and traded with the people of Buka, northern Bougainville, and named the big island "Bougain"...ville, that is, the village or town of the Bougain) after his family name. He entered in his log book an impressive description of the place and the people and added to his world map the new island of Bougainville and where to find it.

German rule in Melanesia

Some three decades later Bougainville faced other intrusions from "invaders". The next push by imperialism to colonise and control indigenous peoples within the Asia-Pacific rim came from the British, Germans, Dutch and French. Under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck representatives of the German Imperial Government set foot in Neu Guinea, Bougainville and the Solomons in 1884. At first they did not aim to establish administrative posts. Their main purpose was the economic exploitation of the region for raw materials to send back to the "fatherland".

Bismarck argued that Germany did not have enough manpower or even a navy to control any territory it could lay claim to but he did not deny those Germans that were already in the field and involved in various activities, the protection of the Reich. He put forward the theory that "nations have no friends, they only have interests" and that "the flag follows trade -- not the reverse and that it should not cost the government much to keep the flag flying". (The History of Melanesia 2nd Waigani Seminar. p. 46) But because of the competition between the European imperial governments for colonial possessions, Germany later changed its notion of simple economic interests to that of territorial control as well.

He used his gunboats to extend his control into the Solomons from Rabaul. Areas of the Solomons Archipelago which came under German control included Bougainville while the rest came under Britain and was known as the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. Huge coconut plantations were developed along the eastern seaboard of Neu Guinea all the way to Bougainville. These plantations remain today but are now in the hands of

Australian multi-national corporations. The lands of the Bougainville people were simply just taken by the Germans for their own exploitative economic programs. Any input into the local population by the German Imperial Government was to "educate" the natives to better understand their white masters so that they could become efficient productive agents, working in their plantations as labourers or as trained policemen to help maintain the status quo for the "fatherland".

Germany and Britain do a deal

The contention between the colonial powers as to their properties and spheres of influence within the Pacific became such a serious business that it became necessary for them to settle their territories and boundaries. Negotiations between Britain and Germany were initiated in 1886 to sort out their spheres of influence within the western Pacific once and for all. The Solomons south of Bougainville fell within the British sphere of control while Bougainville remained with Germany. But Germany's control of its colonial holdings in the South Seas was short-lived. In 1918 when Germany lost the First World War to the allied forces, Germany also lost all her territories in the Pacific to the allied forces. German Neu Guinea and Bougainville fell into the hands of Britain and Australia and later became a Mandated Territory under the League of Nations, administered by Australia on behalf of Britain, along with its own Territory of Papua.

The right thing at this stage would have been to return Bougainville and its people back to the Solomons. Despite the voiced objections of our leaders, Bougainvilleans were simply forced against their will to be part of this new "unholy marriage", with the trust territory of Neu Guinea and Papua.

Bougainville is geographically a part of the Solomon Islands Archipelago. It is the biggest island lying in the north of the Solomons chain and is a mere eight kilometres from the arbitrary sea border of the independent state of the Solomon Islands. But Bougainville is over 900 kilometres from the Papua New Guinea capital, Port Moresby. It is not part of the land mass of PNG and is separated by the Solomon Sea.

The people of Bougainville and the Solomons are related to each other culturally and ethnically. They have visited and traded with each other since time immemorial. Even after the formal separation of Bougainville from the rest of the Solomon Islands archipelago traditional border crossings and clan visitations for family reasons took place and this exchange goes on today. The people of Bougainville also have much darker skins than the people of Papua New Guinea.

Lineage is through the matrilineal clan system, where the clan is traced through the "queen" of the clan who is also the titleholder and custodian of the tribal land. There are few resemblances with the people of Papua New Guinea who are made up of very culturally diverse groupings with up to 800

different tribes and languages.

Australian slave traders

In the 19th century, after American whalers had occasionally come to trade, Australian slave traders, euphemistically called the "blackbirders" came to enslave not only Bougainvilleans but also Solomon Islanders and New Caledonians (now Vanuatans). They were taken to do slave work in the sugar fields of Queensland and coconut plantations in Fiji and Samoa.

Another interruption in the lives of Bougainvilleans was the occupation by the Japanese Imperial Army during WW II. When the tide of the war in the Pacific turned, the Americans landed on West Bougainville and there was fierce fighting between the two forces. The people did not quite know why their land was once again occupied by foreigners and being used as a platform to fight their wars away from their shores. Hundreds of Bougainvilleans were unnecessarily killed in the fighting.

When the war suddenly ended the warring parties just packed up and left leaving behind a war ravaged Bougainville. It soon reverted back to the Australians, then to the United Nations along with Papua New Guinea as a trust territory. The people of Bougainville were never asked by the Australian colonial administration whether they wanted to continue with a "political marriage" to a people and a place they were not related to. Did Australia have any "sovereign right" to play around with the rights of the Bougainvillean people and their future destiny? Bougainvillean nationalism and dissent began to grow. At this time, however, they were still not in any position nor had the strength to do anything about it.

The economic exploitation of the resources of PNG and Bougainville began in earnest. Alluvial gold was found in PNG in 1926 and booming Australian mining enterprises existed in 1932. Needless to say all gold was shipped out of New Guinea. The imperialism of the Germans and British continued and gained strength with Australian colonialism. Head taxes first imposed by the Germans to draw the people into menial employment for cash, became trouble for Australia after WW II. This is when Bougainvilleans rejected the idea of colonial wages on Australian plantations and also rejected ideas of development imposed from above which demanded taxation.

The people at this stage began their own productive and efficient plantations of cash crops which led to Bougainville becoming the richest agricultural exporter in the Pacific within 40 years. To achieve this using their own resources the people had to do tremendous physical work and they had to resist colonial oppression with physical force. In time the economic base within Bougainville was combined with the development of an educational resource. Bougainvilleans have always been among the best educated in the colony. In the struggle for independence the island attracted highly educated people who applied their training and developed

a unique village- based education system. At the same time they led the way in developing local autonomy within the PNG political system.

The demand for self-determination was nurtured first on Bougainville as the people reclaimed their identity in decades of struggle. The village people have shared in this struggle and directed its course in spite of the power and wealth brought against them. Colonial tyranny was concealed in talk of justice for everybody -- except the villagers of Bougainville. The attachment to traditional culture has strengthened the political struggle and provided the resources to mobilise in strength at the village level. Their identity as Bougainvilleans is more and more based on the affirmation of their culture as Solomon Islanders. Most important has been land, the basis of all Bougainville culture. Alienation from agricultural land was a problem but this did not approach the grievances of the landowners affected first by mine construction and then the destruction and devastation of the environment by Bougainville Copper.

The people in the villages in conjunction with their national leaders struggled for a hundred years to bring things together -- their world, their education, their economic development as well as their culture, religion and political institutions. The solutions were continually worked out in the villages but the proposals for development were brought to a halt by the barbaric intervention of the PNG military, let loose on the people of Bougainville by the PNG Government.

The plunder of Bougainville

The "mother of all plundering" on Bougainville was really begun by CRA, a subsidiary of Conzinc RioTinto, one of the world's leading mining giants. CRA owns a 53 per cent share in Bougainville Copper Ltd (BCL) while 20 per cent is owned by the Papua New Guinea government. Not even one equity share was offered to the people of Bougainville or to the landholders whose land was taken for the CRA mine.



Australian mining interests on Bougainville go back to 1929 when prospectors mined for gold. The Australian Bureau of Mineral Resources set the scene for further mineral exploitation when a prospecting license virtually gave prospectors the freedom to march all over the mountains and, in most cases, to arrive unannounced upsetting the landowners who did not

understand what was going on.

In 1965 a rich copper deposit was drilled and RTZ soon became excited about its positive results. The mountainous region of Bougainville was buzzing with activity which compounded the anxiety of the landowners as to what was happening to the, once upon a time, serene and undisturbed environment. A bewildered people watched fearfully as their country was transformed "into one of the largest industrial development sites in the southern hemisphere ... a classical case of machine-made modernity being dumped rather unceremoniously into primitive communities still on the edge of the Stone Age." (J Ryan, *The Hot Land* p 328-329) What a shocking experience for a peaceful people still content with hunting and gathering -- having to suddenly cope with the full impact of western industrialisation pushed upon them, tearing at the very heart of their existence, at their land and ancestors and defiling the home of their ancestral spirits, their practices and culture.

J Ryan went on:

"The hundreds of Europeans flocking to Panguna knew exactly what they were doing and what lay ahead, but to the 1,000 Bougainville men in and around the valley almost everything they saw and heard was new, and a little frightening. In 1964 the prospectors had made their first mistake, and the blame belongs to the Australian Government.

Resistance

"They had entered the Panguna and surrounding tribal land without clearly asking permission of the owners. This was the beginning of a surging wave of tribal resistance to try and keep their only heritage, their land, and to get rid of the Australians and Conzinc RioTinto. The villages were desperately afraid of losing the land for which their ancestors had fought and died, or having to leave the mountains in which their protective tribal spirits lived. "Port Moresby, Canberra and Conzinc RioTinto were adamant that prospecting should continue despite the Panguna tribes. The company was at Panguna to make money for its shareholders and the Australian Government wanted it to stay in the hope of revolution using the puny economy of PNG. The landholders had to be brushed aside as politely as possible in the national interest. Some of the angry villagers began erecting Tambu signs ("keep out") and one group destroyed a company tent and some equipment.

"Equipment was damaged, helicopter pads were put out of action. The local police detachment was increased and drilled in riot fighting. "Near one mountain village, Patrol Officer (ie, a colonial officer) John Gordon-Kirby was greeting a Conzinc RioTinto helicopter when village women with their babies in their arms rushed forward screaming 'kill us, kill our children'".

(Ibid p 328-329)

Giving "legitimacy"

English and Australian mining legislation was used to give "legitimacy" to the rights of CRA. The company was given an unlimited run of the field to a ceiling of ten thousand square miles around the deposit which virtually gave CRA freedom of all the resources on Bougainville. This agreement did not include the landholders. The next victims were the coastal people of Rorovana who owned the prime land most suitable for a port. In a confrontation with the riot police and the colonial officers from Port Moresby, the people fought tooth and nail to prevent their land from being taken.

The villagers, women, men and children, were not armed but were confronted by armed police carrying rifles, batons, shields and gas masks. They were fired upon with tear gas and charged with batons. Women threw themselves in front of company bulldozers, prepared to sacrifice their lives for their ancestral land. "The Australian" wrote in an editorial (August 1969): "the use of tear-gas and clubs this week to enforce alien laws on the uncomprehending people was a damning indictment of the administration of Papua New Guinea -- which is to say of Canberra..."

Like the skin on the back of your hand

The young Bougainvillean leader, Mr Raphael Bele, emphasised the importance of land within his culture: "If someone wants my land and I do not want them to have it, he will have to kill me or I will kill them..." ("The Bougainville Land Crisis" p 29, 1969) "...to Bougainvilleans, land is like the skin on the back of your hand. You inherit it, and it is your duty to pass it on to your children in as good a condition as, or better than, that in which you received it. You would not expect us to sell our skin, would you? (Ibid p 31) These words were told to Sir Maurice Mawby, Chairman of CRA when he tried to negotiate for the land to build his company port.

The fight went as far as a challenge in the Australian High Court. It was argued, "the minerals belong to the landowners ... it had always been so, even before WWI, when Bougainville was a colony of Germany. The Australian Administration after it had taken over the mandate from the League of Nations, had not itself acquired the minerals.

"The Australian Constitution expressly provides that 'there can be no acquisition of a person's property, except on the condition that just terms of compensation were payable' and since no compensation for minerals had been paid, THE COPPER IN THE GROUND AT PANGUNA BELONGS TO THE OWNERS OF THE LAND. "Therefore, the Mining Ordinances of PNG giving permission to

the company were invalid."

(The Melbourne "Age" February 1969) But in August 1969 the seven judges hearing the case decided in favour of Australia, thus legitimizing the mining leases on Bougainville. The High Court used a 1963 High Court ruling that: "under the Constitution, Australia had the power to administer Territories and that their power in the Territories was quite self-contained. Thus the terms which applied to the taking of land in Australian States did not have to be applied to the Territory of Papua New Guinea." (Bedford and Mamak p. 29)

The landowners were forced to accept an agreement with CRA.

Dissent grows, mobilisation follows

In 1972 BCL exported its first copper concentrate and gold. It also enjoyed a three year tax holiday, in years when the metal price was very high. However, the provisions of the agreement were never strictly adhered to. Besides, the landowners never had a comprehensive understanding of the absolute destruction, degradation and pollution of their land, sea and air environment which was yet to follow.

After 17 years of trying to negotiate with CRA and the PNG Government for better terms within the agreement and for more efficient environmental control, the Panguna Landowners Association saw no other avenue but to mobilise. They started with demonstrations, petitions, submissions and meetings but to no satisfactory conclusion. When they saw that these actions would not bear any positive outcome and having been tested to the 'nth degree, they resorted to the only thing that would command a serious change of attitude by CRA. They aimed to shut down the Bougainville Copper Mine.

The landowners blew-up the pylons carrying electric supply lines to the mine from the coast. The mine immediately ceased operation. The PNG Government responded by sending its Defence force to Bougainville, thereby declaring an all out war with the people of the island. The mine was closed in March 1989 and what has ensued since is a protracted eight year war between the PNG Defence Forces and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). The people of Bougainville are known right throughout the world as the only Indigenous People that have shut a mine owned by one of the mining giants of the world.

State-enforced development and indigenous people's rights State-enforced development in the Asia-Pacific region has led to naked and blatant exploitation of natural resources be it in the form of timber, fisheries or mineral wealth. In some instances, such exploitation has been going on now for scores of years, especially where indigenous peoples have come under repressive and dictatorial regimes -- a common phenomenon within the

Asia-Pacific region.

The concerns of the indigenous peoples of this region, where we have more than two thirds of the world's indigenous people, are the manner in which some governments have been dictatorial in their development policies. The United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development which was adopted by the General Assembly in 1986 recognises that:

"development is a comprehensive economic, social cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all the individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom."

But most governments are selective in their application of human rights and will choose "economic rights" over other rights. They assert that in order to provide social benefits they must be allowed the right to exploit a country's natural resources. It is often said that this is "on behalf of their communities" but is, most times, backed by legislation which is often discriminatory and disadvantageous to its citizens.

Our view is that one cannot talk about human rights in a limited way. Development must be holistic, balanced, and sustainable. It must not be dictated from the top downwards and must involve all citizens in a way that should maximize full participation, provide equal opportunities and distribution.

Indigenous peoples have always been faithful custodians of their land and resources. Their skilled knowledge and management of the land and the environment is a scientific method that they have perfected and practiced since time immemorial.

Natural to resist

When people are deprived of their rights it is natural to resist. And when injustice becomes law, resistance is justified and becomes a duty. The people have been made landless, poor, denied access to health care and education. Resistance from the people becomes their only form of expression.

This, unfortunately, has often been met with extreme repressive actions from governments and their armed forces. Militarisation has, therefore, become the biggest threat to democracy, peace, and the development of the indigenous peoples of the Asia-Pacific region. It has deprived civil society of its political freedom, denied the right to liberation, self-determination and freedom from fear and expression. The line between military rule and democracy is increasingly blurred these days. Militarism

poses an ever threatening picture of gross violations of the rights of the indigenous people.

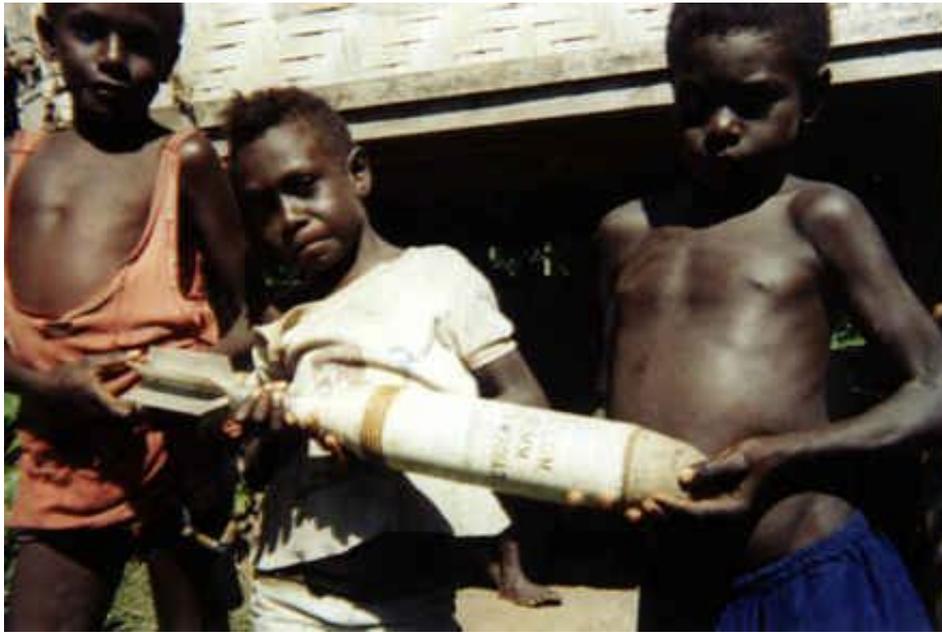
The big picture of the exploitation of resources is bound to lead to increased poverty and inequality. The gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" can only continue to widen under these circumstances, negating the notion that ALL have the right to development. The people of Bougainville have faced exploitation, plunder and the defrocking of their sovereignty. Given prospecting rights on Bougainville, CRA was let loose and plundered the island. This did not only result in monetary exploitation of Bougainvilleans but also in the devastation of their environment, flora and fauna. Their sacred grounds, the land of their ancestors, gone forever in the "jaws" of and in the name of modernisation and development.

The struggle of the Bougainvillean people shows how in the villages, in conjunction with their national leaders, they struggled for a hundred years to bring things together -- their world, their economic development as well as their culture, religion and political institutions. Confronted with state injustice and the power of the multi-nations with their aggressive development policies, and in the absence of any acceptable solutions to their grievances, Bougainvilleans had no other option but to mobilise and face the "aggressor" head-on.

The struggle continues

The struggle continues to this day. The price has been high. A blockade has been put around Bougainville -- land, sea and air. Close to 10,000 Bougainvilleans, men, women and children have died so far from both lack of medicine and from war. The blockade has amounted to genocide of a people merely fighting to protect what is their own. After a century of social, cultural, economic and political exploitation and subjugation by outsiders our people decisively acted to stop further arbitrary exploitation of their natural resources and disrespect of their fundamental human rights.

We link together with other indigenous people of the world as we continue to claim our right to self-determination, the right to conduct our own public affairs, manage our own economic and social needs in a civil society, where all peoples of the world are expected to co-exist and respect the fundamental rights of others.



The Authors

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Further Information

- You can find out more about Bougainville, including what you can do to help in the UK, at the [Solidarity South Pacific](#) website.

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