





**A BRA soldier at the Panguna mine, takes a drink under a sweltering sun. His job is guarding the tiny store of fuel left at Panguna. (Left above).**

**The Panguna mine in full production. Photo from the early 1980s. (Left below).**



## **Bougainville: the death of a mega-mine**

*By Jim Beatson*

**For more than two decades the Panguna copper/gold mine on Bougainville island was one of the world's largest single producers of of copper concentrate.**

**In May 1989 the mine was closed. Less than a year later Bougainville declared itself independent. In 1991 the mine is still closed and the future of mining in Bougainville uncertain. Jim Beatson gives a background to this dramatic development.**

Rimmed by the misty jungles of the Panguna mountains Bougainville Copper Limited's abandoned mine stands silent under the beating sun, like a vast dried out tropical ulcer.

The open-cut mouth, three kilometers in diameter, is the largest hole in the Southern Hemisphere. The silence is broken only by sounds coming from the mine's workshops as *Bougainville Revolutionary Army* (BRA) soldiers restore machine guns from crashed US fighter aircraft, left behind after WWII.

Bougainville is a lush Pacific tropical island paradise of breath taking beauty, two hundred and fifty kilometers by sixty across. Long-beaked kokomos fly over volcanic rain forests and palm fringed gleaming white beaches while cicadas harmonize as scarlet sunsets fall.

The island lies 800 kilometers north-east of Papua New Guinea and Australia. Its 160,000 people, said to be the blackest on the planet, are ethnically and culturally distinct from the "red-skins" of Papua New Guinea who governed Bougainville until last year's revolution.

"Bougainville" had spelt "wealth" for PNG in 1975, the year Australia granted Papua New Guinea its Independence. It came with a mountainful of copper speckled with gold and silver and the largest cocoa plantations in the Pacific. The mine provided PNG with 17 per cent of government revenues and 44 per cent of foreign exchange<sup>1</sup> and two percent of the world's copper supply.<sup>2</sup>

One hot November evening in 1988, a thirty seven-year-old locally born surveyor employed by BCL, Francis Ona, attended a public meeting. The meeting, held in the capital, Arawa, on Bougainville's coastal plain, 3 000 feet below the Panguna mine, assembled to hear the presentation of an environmental impact study of the mine. The PNG government sponsored study was undertaken by a New Zealand-based consultancy, Geology Associates Ltd.

Francis Ona, born in Guava village next to Panguna, was a traditional land-

owner, angry at the mine's impact on the environment and dissatisfied with the level of compensation payments.

A lot was expected of the meeting.

Panguna's traditional landowners had protested the opening of the mine in 1969 by laying down in front of bulldozers and tying themselves to trees only to swept aside by police wielding teargas and batons.

Now they had patiently explained to academics that fish no longer lived in streams, cocoa crop outputs had declined by up to fifty per cent<sup>3</sup>, "mining had caused mental illness"<sup>4</sup>, and villages had been relocated. Even the flying foxes, a form of bat and a local delicacy, had flown away.

When the report's findings were delivered it became clear the consultants had uncovered little hard evidence to support the villager's claims.

The tone of the meeting became incredulous, then acrimonious.

Francis Ona asked about fish caught in the Empress Augusta Bay, fed by the outflow of the Jaba River. A 100 kt of waste a day, including chemical residues used to float off the minerals, tipped into the Jaba left fish to choke in a downward flowing mud-bath. "Why were fish, caught in the Bay, ulcerated?"

Ona was told there was no more than circumstantial evidence that the mine was the culprit, the fish could have become ulcerated from a periodic disease. The liquid discharged into the river "was harmless", so harmless, Ona claims he was told, he "could drink it".

Hearing this Francis Ona stood up and walked out of the meeting.

He walked out and into the jungle from which he, and a group of supporters who joined him to become the nucleus of the BRA, did not leave for over two years.

From his secret jungle home Ona wrote a letter asking BCL for 10 billion PNG kina (PGK) compensation. Ona explains:

Jim Beatson, a Pacific affairs journalist who contributes regularly to Britain's *The Guardian* newspaper, has spent three weeks on troubled Bougainville island where its people have seceded from Papua New Guinea.



*Wearing Bougainville Copper overalls, a BRA soldier surveys the Arawa market at dawn from a truck carrying a machine gun from a crashed US Bell Aircobra fighter aircraft and restored in the mine's workshop. (Below).*

"10 billion kina was the lowest value we could set for compensation. It was a warning to the company and the government that to misuse our land means the life of people here."

He waited one month in vain for a reply.

First the BRA raided BCL's stockade for explosives and then commenced manufacturing rifles using water pipe for barrels. The rifles accept WWII ammunition, tonnes of which Americans bulldozed into underground dumps at the Pacific campaign's end.

For six months the BRA blew up pylons carrying electricity to the mine forcing the mine to close intermittently and then permanently on May 15, 1989.

Closing the mine was not enough.

Martin Miriori, then an official with the South Pacific Forum explains, "For a hundred years Bougainville had been a pawn in a colonial chess game" - a game many countries played, but few people followed. Bougainville was swapped by Britain in exchange for Samoa in 1899 to become part of Germany's New Guinea colony, despite Bougainville geographically belonging to the Solomon Island groups, eight kilometers away, which Britain retained. Then Bougainville was passed to Australia, who claimed Germany's Pacific colony during WWI. Australia in turn lost part of it to Japan during WWII.

In 1969, six years before granting PNG its Independence, Australia negotiated the mine project. It gave 20 per cent control to the PNG government, 26 per cent to private Australian investors and 54 per cent to Conzinc Rio Tinto of Australia, itself forty nine per cent owned by Britain's Rio Tinto-Zinc.

As the battle to close the mine commenced "our secessionist sentiment reawakened," explains a cheerful 26 year old woman teacher who leads an Arawa local church choir. Secessionist sentiments were reinforced after sixteen hun-

dred PNG troops landed, sent to crush the BRA's several hundred strong guerrillas. PNG's "Red-skins", frustrated in battle and facing an elusive, popular enemy sought traditional "payback" - from civilians. A thousand houses were burnt to the ground and rape, torture and murder became regular occurrences. "Our people united behind Ona and the BRA".

In March 1990 PNG's Prime Minister, Rabbie Namaliu, withdrew his discredited troops.

Francis Ona seized the opportunity declaring Bougainville a Republic and himself its President.

The day after Ona's inauguration, May 18 1990, Namaliu cut Bougainville's telephone lines, withdrew all public servants including doctors and blockaded the island.

The blockade has left shops empty of goods and customers. Petrol stations, like government buildings, engineering shops, the radio station, airport and police stations were burnt down during the war. Only the dozens of Catholic, United and Seventh Day Adventist churches of these religious people appear undamaged.

Bougainville has turned into a ghost country. Only the people have not disappeared - just the daily necessities of life.

Sewerage and town water systems remain but lack fuel to power them.

"Plentiful rivers and good rainfall are a blessing" explains Martin Miriori, now Coordinator of Ona's Interim Government, as he takes a bath in a river, "but we lack the things that go with them: soap, detergent and toilet paper."

"We eat what we grow", reveals his wife Scolastica.

Kau-kau, taro (types of sweet potato) with vines and fern leaves and a little fish cooked in coconut milk is Bougainville's universal meal.

"We have had to eat it twice a day, for the past year. It is nutritious but we are tired of it."

No new clothing for the five thousand babies born since the revolution has arrived, and islanders are exhuming corpses to retrieve clothing.





*One of the founders of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, Thomas Moiku in WWII American helmet, displays a couple of the “hundreds of weapons we have made, using WWII .303 and .6 ammunition” found all over the island and now carried in converted car seat belts.*





*Much of Panguna copper mine's infrastructure, including this mammoth Euclid dump truck was burnt out in the revolution. Francis Ona has turned the remaining buildings into his headquarters and offered the other 44, intact but rotting, Euclids for sale.*

An immunisation program in one of the world's highest risk areas for contracting malaria, tuberculosis, tropical ulcers and dysentery is stalled for want of electricity to refrigerate ampoules.

As PNG's year-old blockade bites a new scourge is appearing among under-tens - leprosy. Eleven cases of the disfiguring disease have appeared among 5 to 10 years-olds, just from the area surrounding Arawa.

Dr Charles Loubai, Head of the Bougainville Red Cross and one of four doctors left on the island, all of who work in the Foundation Hospital in Arawa, says that since the blockade around 5 000 people have died from normally preventable diseases. "A shortage of basic medicines is not our biggest problem, it's the lack of fuel. No fuel means no lighting, no refrigeration, no diagnostic facilities, no X-rays, no blood supplies, no ambulances and no house calls for those too sick to move. The dramatic increase in malaria cases is a result of a lack of anti-malarials and the ending of aerial spraying with the blockade."

A people once used to one of the Pacific's highest standards of living are making do. Jim Tausire, Commander of the BRA in Wakunai, on Bougainville's north east coast sounds as proud at having made primitive petrol from coconut milk and washing detergent from cocoa beans as describing the BRA successes in fighting the PNG troops. "We make two kinds of fuel, a wet one for kerosene lamps and a more complicated drier process for diesel and petrol" adding "we also make a pretty good home brew from pineapples." In January 1991 BCL's Australian parent, CRA Ltd, estimated the cost of restarting the mine at 256 million Australian dollars (MAUD).<sup>5</sup>

By June the estimate had risen to 340 - 480 MAUD.<sup>6</sup> This may be a conservative estimate. With every threat of PNG invasion high spirited "BRA boys", as they are known, seek out any remaining

intact infrastructure, of use to either BCL or Papua New Guinea, for destruction.

Destruction appears almost complete in the key towns of Kieta and Arawa where BCL's infrastructure is mainly located. Many of BCL's Arawa houses have lost roofs and walls, for use in repairing houses burnt by PNG's Defence Forces. Radio and telecommunications facilities are smashed, sub-contractors plant destroyed, the airport's runway ploughed up. Panguna has been equally devastated. What little the "BRA boys" have left untouched, the tropical weather and rapid growth of its luxuriant flora are finishing.

Not quite completely.

Arawa Primary has an eleven year old who drives his friends to school, when he can find the fuel. Another has three IBM computers in his bedroom waiting for electricity. 400 near new vehicles, mainly BCL's distinctive yellow Datsuns, together with countless fax machines, computers and photo-copiers were left behind as all but a dozen ex-patriots fled.

"It was first come, best revolutionary dressed" complains a professional woman. "Everything was reversed. The 'have-nots' have everything, people that studied and worked hard have nothing."

But behind real complaints and hardships there is pride in the revolution. People without disease are healthier, slimmer, making music at night and socialising. Everywhere people ask "has anyone else ever done it before - staged a revolution by shutting a foreign-owned mine?"

Without telephones, media and little fuel for transport, rumors of a PNG invasion regularly circulate. The Republic's citizens listen angrily to PNG radio stations which threaten invasion in the name of requests for essential services.

"They deliberately understate the strength of our commitment to secession to try to destabilise us and spread the myth of local disenchantment to overseas countries" explains a BRA soldier as he listens to short wave radio. He hopes for

announcements of aid from foreign governments and non-government agencies or pressure on PNG to lift the blockade.

Pressure has increased following an admission on Australian television by Colonel Leo Nuia, the head of PNG's Bougainville troops during the year long campaign, that his soldiers threw the bodies of five Bougainville civilians to sharks off from a helicopter on loan from Australia's Army and flown by a New Zealand contract pilot. He confessed that his troops, after killing a United Church pastor, Benito Ramo, and members of his congregation on suspicion of being BRA members, dumped five of the bodies using the helicopter.

PNG's Prime Minister Namaliu has ordered an inquiry into the helicopter incident and other alleged atrocities during the conflict. Australian and New Zealand government are now sending in emergency medical supplies although Australia is continuing to supply military aid to PNG without strings.

The abandoned Panguna mine and its buildings have been turned into a headquarters for Francis and his Supreme Advisory Council or 'Francis and the Supremes' as they are jokingly called around the island.

Shy, short and stocky, a father-of-five with close set eyes wearing shorts and sandals, Ona is a practising Catholic. One who refuses to deny consulting a nine year old for spiritual advise.

Ona makes an unlikely revolutionary.

He sits at a simple table positioned to take advantage of shade under a building. The President is surrounded by an entourage of around thirty males aged between six and thirty wearing crucifixes and St Christophers and bearing home-made .303 rifles, slingshots, shot guns and smiles. The ones over fifteen are "BRA Boys". They are curious to see a journalist, yet Francis, inexperienced and uncomfortable when answering questions, refuses to shoo them away.

Opinions flow directly from his heart.





"Politically our people are independent. People were really excited by our first anniversary. At the moment my people are getting sick, curable diseases are affecting our people. But on the other side, food and shelter, they are quite happy. Now the people from the other (PNG) side are withdrawn and people are really free. Free to walk alone everywhere. They are free like birds."

Ona's mood moves to anger when pressed about their problems. Papua New Guinea he complains "is failing to honour the agreement to deliver essential services" as required under terms of peace talks held in January. "Papua New Guinea still occupies a part of Bougainville" a reference to PNG control of the small island, Buka, off Bougainville's northern coast, from where disturbing reports of PNG human rights abuses circulate.

But why should PNG bankroll Bougainville's independence by supplying essential services? "If PNG don't want to do that, get off the ground, get off

Bougainville, we just want to be a free people."

Could Panguna reopen? The man who shut down the mine refuses to say it will never again roar:

"We can survive without the mine" he says, but when pressed qualifies, "If the mine is to reopen we have to sort out the political problem first. Then we can look into that matter later on. I'll leave it up to the people. We are setting up village level government. I'll leave it up to them to decide."

Even severely damaged, the mine is never far from the centre of political debate on the island. If Bougainville's population is quite certain it was right to free itself from Papua New Guinea, it lacks universal conviction over the mine's closure..

In Sewai, an area west of the mine watered by Jaba River, villagers have very definite views. They want it shut forever. When the mine operated the Jaba was swollen by 100 kt of debris deposited

daily, turning it into a downward flowing mud-bath. Now it is again crystal-clear, albeit with a copper-blue bed.

Jonathan Ngati, Chairman of Siwai's Joint Council of Village Chiefs Planning Committee speaks slowly and carefully.

"Our cocoa production has risen since the mine closed. I don't think the people are dreaming of reopening the mine."

Justin Monona, secretary to national BRA commander General Sam Kaona, reflects the anti-mining views of many villagers who comprise the vast majority of the island's 160 000 population.

He believes huge mining operations conflict with tribal culture.

"When the mine came it made us feel lost and frustrated."

"Each of the hundreds of tribes on Bougainville is identified with a bird or animal, a plant and a natural phenomenon like the sea, clouds, rain or another. We see ourselves as part of the environment. My tribe, the Kenung, is identified



with the Singiru (a pigeon), the Kenung tree and the sea. If I step on the excreta of the Singiru it could give me a boil or sickness. There are many traditions and obligations in which we believe." He explains these traditions were overwhelmed with the arrival of the mine. "Francis Ona had the courage to say the mine is spoiling our environment and destroying our cultural values."

"Our law develops up from the village as a service, unlike Western law, which comes down from above and is often manipulated and corrupt. Rarely does it come as a service. When the BCL royalties were handed down to traditional land owners many had become educated and isolated from their people. They had abandoned the Melanesian way in favour of Western philosophy. As a result some people got a new four wheel drive car and others didn't even get a new pair of sandals."

Closure of the mine has returned Bougainville to a cocoa bean economy. The island has the largest cocoa plantations in the Southern Hemisphere. Ona says "Cocoa gives us 30 million kina a year, which is enough to enable us to run this country."

"How easily?" is a question some are asking.

A cocoa economy provides an average annual income for the Republic's people of 300 kina with the possibility of doubling that as agricultural exports grow with better utilisation of resources.

Mining revenues, at PNG's previous tax and dividend return rate, would add 1200 to 1 500 kina<sup>7</sup> annually as well as employment for three and a half thousand.<sup>8</sup>

If detailed analysis of potential mining revenues is a conversational rarity on Bougainville the general point is not lost

among a population aware that an aerial survey, undertaken before the mine's closure, revealed good mining prospects elsewhere on the island.

In Arawa, where most of the island's tertiary educated population live, it is widely believed that once the crisis ends a more secure future is needed. Martin Miriori, would like the mine to be re-opened with a new mining company "but coming in on our terms" with less pollution using a larger workforce and smaller profits.

"Maybe we can look at the kind of technology employed when we restart the mine. Some months ago we wrote to the Chinese government expressing our interest that if they recognise our UDI we could consider adopting Chinese technology, where there is a massive labour force rather than huge machinery operating 24 hours a day." He laughs, "We did not get a reply."

But proposals like this, if practical, are out of step with the outlook of many of Francis Ona's key fifteen strong Supreme Advisory Council, and much of the BRA.

Ona's strategy is to restore a system of local government by village chiefs, a traditional level of government ignored by PNG. Inauguration ceremonies to return power to village chiefs are taking place all over island. Four took place just in the area around Sewai while I was there. The plan is to create a village-based structure which reports directly to him, pre-empting the growth of a national governmental culture. Such a culture is associated with the development of corruption in African countries. For the time being Ona has down graded the role of the Interim Government to an advisory body to himself and the 'Supremes'.

Francis Ona's promotion of village power provides him with another benefit. It puts off the thorny issue of settling Panguna's immediate future.

Some parallels with Africa remain.

Women perform much of the work on the island, including the mandatory back-breaking two hours a day tending the family kau-kau patch. They have been the victims of rape by PNG troops, and in the past, BRA soldiers. Yet they are denied a voice. Entry to chunanas - the large traditional thatched roofed meeting halls where village forums occur - is forbidden for women.

They are tired of ill-health and deprivation. Like their men, they dread a return of PNG troops. They know their people's determination combined with the island's dense foliage would prevent a PNG victory, but would also mean more casualties.

Following a church service Catholic women gathered to sing a John Lennon song for me with revised lyrics:

Lord, we are singing give peace a chance,

Lord, we are pleading give peace a chance,

Lord, we are praying give peace a chance.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Since the commencement of mining in 1972 the mine has generated 15.1 billion kina, 44% of PNG's exports over the period. Dividends, royalties and taxes totalled 1.033 billion kina or 17% of PNG revenues. *Mining Journal*, London, 13 April 1990.

<sup>2</sup> *Mining Journal*, London, 7 June 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Author's interview with Jonathan Ngati, Chairman of Siwai's Combined Council of Village Chiefs Planning Committee.

<sup>4</sup> Perpetua Serero, a founder of the Panguna Landowners Association, quoted in Colin Filer's *The Bougainville Rebellion*, a Monograph produced by University of PNG, Dept. of Anthropology and Sociology, Jan. 1990.

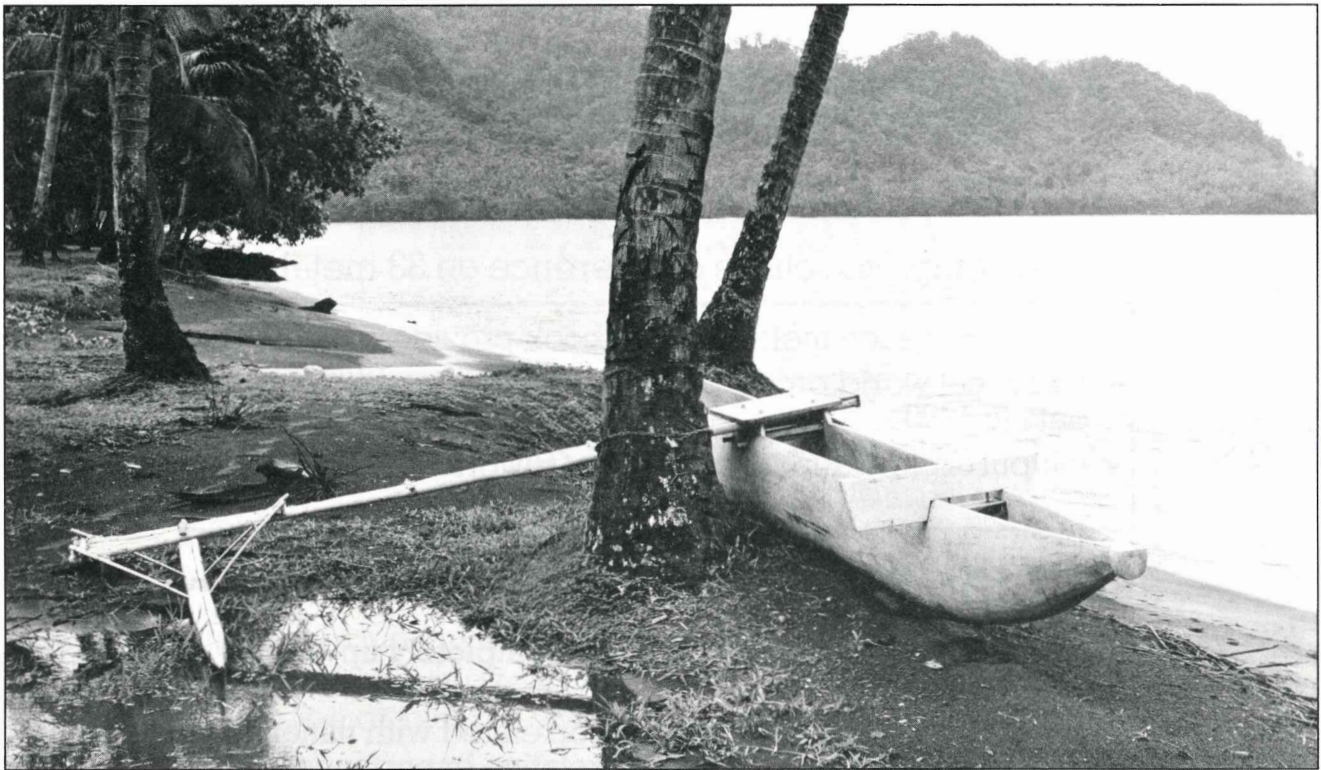
<sup>5</sup> *The Australian* 1991-02-13.

<sup>6</sup> *Mining Journal*, London, 7 June 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Figure extrapolated from BCL payments to PNG for last full year of operations.

<sup>8</sup> Previous size of work force. However, Don Carruthers, Chief Executive of BCL, was reported earlier this year as saying that the mine could be re-opened with a staff of only 2 500. ■





## Peace Talks

On August 26th 1991 peace talks between the unrecognized Republic of Bougainville failed to take place despite months of planning. The blockade continues.

A New Zealand frigate stood by off Bougainville's coast, where the talks were due to take place (the Bougainvillean revolutionary leaders, Ona and General Kaona, fearing a PNG assassination team, refuse talks elsewhere) and representatives of the Commonwealth Secretariat led by its Secretary General, Chief Emeko Anyaoku, were ready to mediate while New Zealand's Maori former Governor General, Sir Paul Reeves, had agreed to chair the negotiations.

As the talks were due to start Francis Ona ended weeks of sparring with PNG's political leaders by sending PNG Prime Minister Namaliu a letter demanding Namaliu's presence at the talks, and that Bougainville's status as a Republic be central to the agenda.

Ona's demands stem from two earlier rounds of talks in late 1990 and in January this year. The first, which took place

in the New Zealand warship, Endeavour, produced a PNG commitment to end the blockade although this never eventuated. More significantly, the talks provided tacit PNG recognition of Bougainville by accepting Ona's Interim Government, rather than Bougainville Members of PNG's Parliament as negotiators.

The outcome of January's talks, called the Honiara Declaration, since they were held in in neighbouring Solomon Island capital of Honiara, produced a swathe of decisions but no long term political solution. Debate on the key issue of Bougainville sovereignty was deferred until the August talks.

The Honiara Declaration established a Task Force made up of figures from both sides to implement their decisions. These included: disarming the BRA in exchange for a general amnesty; inviting a Multinational Supervisory Team to oversee (1) a cease-fire, (2) the BRA's disarmament, and (3) the August talks; restoration of PNG civil services; an-

other promise of lifting the blockade, which was partially implemented.

Ona, who had not attended the talks, interpreted the Declaration as capitulation to PNG, disowned the document and his delegation for signing it, and so driving a wedge between the Interim Government and Panguna.

It was widely agreed that Ona's presence at the August talks was essential if they were to be meaningful, but he in turn felt as Head of State he could only take part if his opposite number, Prime Minister Namaliu, also attended.

Namaliu, anxious to portray the Bougainville problems an internal PNG matter, insisted on being represented by Foreign Minister Sir Michael Somare.

Ona's reasoning is as understandable as Namaliu's. Yet Namaliu's hope that by refusing to talk of Bougainville's political independence he will prevent it, appears premised on a misjudgment of the islander's determination. The tragedy is that by reimposing the blockade, more people will die.