

## 3. Descent into civil war

### Major fighting begins

In 1987 and 1988, the New Panguna Landowners' Association organised public demonstrations, some of which culminated in attacks on BCL property. The landowners were joined in their attacks on mine property by some young mine workers who felt discriminated against as Bougainvilleans by BCL. November 1988 saw a decisive escalation from minor looting and arson to the use of explosives to blow up BCL electrical pylons along the Panguna Highway and destroy property at the mine site. We might call the demolition of the pylons and the vigorous reaction of the PNG security forces to it as the triggers for the formation of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) led by Francis Ona and of the civil war.

Regan (2007) argues that the leadership of the New Panguna Landowners' Association 'were seeking neither permanent closure of the mine, nor the initiation of a secessionist struggle'. Rather Ona and others around him, such as PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) captain and explosives expert Sam Kauona, aspired to reopen the mine under a new income-sharing formula that might one day support an independent Bougainville. Some Panguna leaders we interviewed disagreed with this view, insisting that Ona really wanted to close the mine and rid Panguna of 'redskins', rather than simply increase the compensation. Regan (2007) himself concedes that some who joined Ona wanted to close the mine permanently. Probably greater numbers of supporters joined Ona's campaign around Panguna and Arawa because they wanted to end the social dislocation and sense of alienation caused by the huge presence of 'redskins' and Australians taking over their land. Finally, there were always secessionist advocates across Bougainville and they rushed in to seize the historical moment by supporting Ona. Many young men doubtless rallied to the rebellion for the excitement and status of evicting the foreigners and demolishing the symbols of their economic domination. People therefore joined the coalition that became the BRA for different reasons. And Ona was the kind of leader who promised them that they could all achieve their objectives.

Eugene Ogan argues that Ona could have used the crisis in a way we will see that Noah Musingku used it—as a strategy for averting arrest:

[N]o one can know for sure whether [Ona's] motivations might have changed since his initial retreat to the bush, it is much more likely that his apparently political pronouncements represent tactics to extricate himself from a personal dilemma (he has been accused of murdering his patrilineal uncle, Matthew Kove [of the old Panguna Landowners' Association]) than a coherent plan to supplant any government authority. (Ogan 1990:37)<sup>1</sup>

If this was correct, the initiatives of the hawk faction of the PNG Government led by Ted Diro early in the crisis to put a large bounty on Ona's head, for example, might not have been the best strategies to keep the door open to early efforts to broker peace. Police riot squads were deployed to Bougainville in December 1988 from elsewhere in Papua New Guinea soon after the pylon explosions. Immediately there were allegations of brutality by these police, violence escalated and further riot squad police were flown in during January 1989. In March 1989, attacks on government and plantation buildings spread across Bougainville. In response, the first PNGDF troops were deployed to Bougainville later that month. A state-of-emergency on Bougainville was declared by the national government in June 1989. In July 1989, the first 'care centres' were established after villagers became homeless after police/PNGDF destruction of their homes. These were refugee camps where people who fled their homes were kept under surveillance. The care centres became part of the PNG counterinsurgency strategy. Six hundred villagers were evacuated from the mountains where they might provide food for the BRA and villages the BRA might merge into.

The original aims of Ona and his group were about the mine, about what landowners saw as the unjust share they received of the fruits of their land, but probably more fundamentally about the 'process of social disintegration' and environmental disintegration that the mine was causing (Filer 1992:116). It became something more—a call for secession—only after Ona's David versus Goliath performance struck a responsive chord across all of Bougainville and spontaneous attacks on government and foreign property erupted in many places in sympathy. This is not to say that support for the BRA was universal. In the north of the province in particular, and even in Arawa, there were educated elites who saw the economic advantages of integration with Papua New Guinea for the province and for their personal employment opportunities. The excesses of the security forces in response enhanced Ona's position as the bold leader who now would lead all Bougainville in a revolt to independence. There was

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Regan does not think this is very likely, based on his more recent interviews. Moreover, he points out that while it is widely reported that Ona was responsible for the murder of Kove, many people in fact resented Kove for complex reasons. So, any analysis based on a fixed view of who killed Kove seems unwarranted. What is clear is that from very early in the conflict a condition of negotiation from the militant leadership was 'immunity from arrest' (Independent State of Papua New Guinea 1990:34).

nothing unusual about this policing excess. In the Highlands of New Guinea, it was standard practice for the riot police to burn villages in payback for violence. It became a routine tactic for both the police and the military in Bougainville to set fire to houses during patrols. Thousands of houses were razed. PNGDF officer Yauka Liria concluded this was counterproductive:

If we can't get them, we'll get their homes was the general feeling ..... The village, to a villager, is more than just shelter. It is his livelihood, his heritage, his pride. His village is at the centre of his heart. It has almost spiritual and religious significance in PNG society. You will never convince a Papua New Guinea villager who has sat on a hill and watched his village burn to ashes, that both you and he are on the same side. He will hate you for the rest of his life. (Yauka Liria, quoted in Dorney 1998:45)



**Figure 3.1 Francis Ona (centre) holding the Japanese officer's sword captured in World War II that was part of his daily uniform, surrounded by BRA fighters**

Photo: Ben Bohane

## Cease-fire and early peace initiatives fail

From the outset, there were doves in PNG civil society and the national parliament who resisted the analysis of the hawks, who argued to Australian Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, against the use of Australian helicopters and pilots in Bougainville. In 1989, the PNG Government appointed a Special Committee on the Crisis in the North Solomons Province, chaired by Sir John Kaputin, which investigated the conflict's origins and development and made various recommendations to the government on how to prevent escalation as its work progressed. The special committee consistently favoured a negotiated approach to resolving the crisis and was critical of the use of excessive force by the police and military. Kaputin was perhaps the first influential advocate of an international peacekeeping force (from the United Nations, the Commonwealth or the South Pacific Forum [now called the Pacific Islands Forum]) (Wolfers 2006b:11; Independent State of Papua New Guinea 1990:A-17, 74–5).

In February 1989, PNG Prime Minister, Rabbie Namaliu, attempted a cease-fire followed up by the offer in April of a new compensation package for Bougainville. Francis Ona was initially open and an agreement was reached, but PNG police undermined the accomplishment by arresting Ona's people as they left a celebration party and the cease-fire was spurned. When Prime Minister Namaliu announced the June 1989 state-of-emergency, he also announced a 'Peace Package' for Bougainville. The North Solomons Provincial Government under Premier, Joseph Kabui, had been preparing for this through a select committee chaired by Nasioi member John Bika designed to propose a high level of autonomy for Bougainville. Bika was murdered on 11 September 1989 by the BRA. Statements followed from Ona that Bika had undermined support for him and for secession. Bika was due to fly to Port Moresby the next day to sign with Prime Minister Namaliu the framework for a peace that included greatly increased revenue from the mine for Bougainville, including 5 per cent ownership of the mine by landowners and 5 per cent by the provincial government (Dorney 1998:45).

The Prime Minister convened a public peace ceremony attended by 1500 people, including the provincial premier, church and traditional leaders, in Arawa in October 1989. Nothing was accomplished, as Ona, who did not attend, rejected the peace package. In the same period, the Catholic Church was developing an initiative for peace talks and had been receiving positive responses from the PNG Government and the BRA. This effort also collapsed at this time. Escalation was the PNGDF response: 'Operation Footloose' from January 1990 was an all-out war on the BRA. This was intended to enable the national government to negotiate peace from a position of strength, but in fact the BRA got the upper hand over government forces. Graeme Kemelfield (1990) of the Buka campus of

the University of Papua New Guinea put together a team of senior people in the provincial government at the beginning of 1990 who invited Swedish peace researcher Peter Wallensteen to attempt peace negotiations. Wallensteen and the team met with Sam Kaouana of the BRA. A cease-fire agreement was signed with remarkable ease between the BRA and the security forces in March 1990.

The PNGDF and police completely pulled out of Bougainville and Buka Islands in March 1990, though a presence was maintained on Nissan Island 60 km north of Buka (Havini 1992:162). Kemelfield (1990) and his team expected a gradual phase out of the PNGDF's presence. The international observer team to monitor the pullout flew in on the plane on which the last soldiers departed. They did stage a token surrender ceremony (Kemelfield 1990, 1992), though BRA military commander Kauona is reported to have said that '[w]e agreed to lay down our arms, but not to surrender them' (Oliver 1991:236). More than just withdraw the PNGDF, the national government pulled out all government services, resources and public servants. Banks and other businesses controlled from Papua New Guinea were closed and non-Bougainvilleans mostly left the province. An air and sea blockade on the supply of goods and services to Bougainville was imposed in May 1990. What gradually became apparent was that the most devastating aspect of the blockade for the lives of ordinary Bougainvilleans was that it included a blockade of medical supplies (Evans 1992; Gillespie 2009). Papua New Guinea suffered adverse international publicity over this, which ultimately became a factor in reconsideration of the blockade strategy. Meanwhile, Amnesty International in 1990 detailed the deaths of 19 people by extrajudicial execution or after being tortured in custody and 50 other cases of torture or ill treatment in Bougainville. These Amnesty numbers escalated greatly in subsequent reports as the war continued for seven more years.<sup>2</sup>

## Government flight, ethnic flight: enter the Bougainville Interim Government

By mid 1990, a kind of ethnic cleansing had been achieved. With respect to 'redskins', this had been an important objective of many, but not all, among the coalition of interests who joined the BRA. There was a flight of nearly all of the many thousands of 'redskins' from the province and of white expatriates who worked for BCL. Hundreds from mainland Papua New Guinea who were married to Bougainvilleans stayed, however, including the wife of Francis Ona, and some

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<sup>2</sup> Between 1991 and November 1993, Amnesty International reported another 60 extrajudicial executions by the security forces, and between 1994 and January 1997, another 62, plus 13 disappearances of individuals taken into custody by the PNGDF. At the hands of the BRA, 36 deliberate killings were reported, though it was concluded that all these numbers were undoubtedly much higher (Amnesty International 1997).

others were adopted as Bougainvilleans. Some who stayed were victimised, but most were not, and some mainlanders fought in the BRA (Tanis 2002b). Today many whites and mainland New Guineans have returned, though not in the numbers of the 1970s and 1980s. A smaller group who never returned were the Chinese. There had been Chinatowns in Buka, Buin and Kieta. The Chinese were brought to Bougainville as indentured 'coolie' labour by German companies before World War I (Elder 2005:157). During our fieldwork in 2004, 2006 and 2007, we saw none, though John Braithwaite was told of one old Chinese man whom he had met in 1969 who was seeing out his days in a quiet place in the bush, there had been some Chinese intermarriage with Bougainvilleans and there were stories of Chinese collecting rent on stores in Buka. People in Buka spoke of one of the positives of the war as the flight of Chinese from running the shops of the old Chinatowns. It was clear the indigenous management of these shops was seen as a form of progress that Bougainville would not step back from.

The PNG Government's complete pullout and blockade in 1990 surprised the BRA. They thought they were winning the war on the ground against the PNGDF. They thought they had negotiated a cease-fire in which the PNGDF only would pull out, not the police and other services. In fact, the police pulled out first because the Police Commissioner was opposed to the cease-fire and feared his officers would be slaughtered without the protection of the army. This in turn provided the justification for punishing secessionism by completely withdrawing civil servants, who, with some justification, the government said could not be protected. Before departing, the police set all prisoners free, doubtless contributing to the *raskol* (semi-organised crime gangs) problem that took over the province. While there was steering by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister of the strategy of allowing Bougainville to descend into chaos by punitive withdrawal of services and the blockade, it was in fact a strategy that unfolded from a process of independent decisions by what Filer (1992) called 'bits of the state'. By this Filer means subunits of the state, such as the police, fragments of the military or other pieces of the bureaucracy or elected officials, pursuing their own agenda rather than one set by cabinet. In this case, the most decisive bit of the state making its own decision was the police deciding to get out before the military left.

The BRA and its Bougainville Interim Government (BIG) nevertheless seized the moment and declared Bougainville independent as the Republic of Me'ekamui on 17 May 1990. Provincial Premier, Joseph Kabui, was appointed Vice-President of the BIG and Francis Ona President. But the Republic of Me'ekamui was not the inheritor of a state, or even bits of it, after the military pulled out. This was not at all like a coup in which those with the guns declare themselves the new government and take over the management of the old state structures.

Nothing much of the old state was left. The district office buildings that used to house the civil servants were left behind, but then the jubilant, undisciplined young men of the BRA burned them all! The BRA/BIG inherited considerable chaos and ungovernability. Indeed, young BRA fighters who were also surprised at their unexpected overnight victory created a large part of that chaos. Not everything in the mining town of Arawa was trashed at that point, though much of it was, and it was not long before every shop and building was burned out and looted—and many of the houses in the town as well. Vehicles were hijacked. Many women were harassed, especially those who it was believed were consorting with the security forces and those married to ‘redskins’.

Decentralised governance through councils of chiefs was attempted at three tiers: clan, village and area councils of chiefs. But chiefs<sup>3</sup> were not always impressed that no resources were available for their work. The first priority of the BRA/BIG was basic security. They were organised as an insurgency, not as a government. Local commanders had autonomy to keep fighting their local war as an assurance against the BRA leadership being captured. Commanders in some localities had operated more as *raskol* gangs than as a liberation army. They stole from people. They could be arbitrary and capricious in the way they exacted revenge against those they believed might have collaborated with the PNGDF. Many innocent people were tortured and sexually assaulted. Some BRA commanders used their new monopoly of force on their patch to settle old disputes over land, sorcery, local economic inequalities and other grievances that had nothing to do with the BRA struggle. Relatively affluent villages in Buka and on the central eastern coast were sometimes targeted by BRA elements from poorer areas (Regan 2007). Theft of vehicles and other valuables was at times a motive for attacks on particular individuals or places. There was a trade to ship the items by barge to the Solomon Islands for sale (Regan 2007). There were even cases of scores being settled at various stages of the war that dated from World War II, when some communities supported the Japanese and others the Allies (Rimoldi and Rimoldi 1992:18). The chaos of decentralised insurgency and the absence of police allowed groups of armed young men to form for criminal or local political purposes and claim to be BRA. These ‘skin BRA’ terrorised many parts of Bougainville.

## Chaos and the resistance

In time, divisions within the BRA at local levels began to open up cracks in the top leadership as confidence in Francis Ona’s capacity to manage the situation he had fought for began to erode. As one Siwai woman put it in 1993: ‘Francis

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<sup>3</sup> Chiefs are defined here as any form of traditional leader in Bougainville.

never came out openly and talked to the people. He just hid away in his little place up at Panguna.’ Mid 1991 was a time when he particularly needed to be seen out among his people assuring them that order would be restored and that he had a plan for re-establishing security and good governance. Ona needed to be seen ordering the arrest of looters of government property. He needed to be public about punishing BRA fighters who raped women. His aloofness from his people also rendered him unaccountable to them in any informal, deliberative sense. He was a disengaged leader of dramatic gestures, not a man of practical action to solve his peoples’ problems.

Many areas formed BRA groups to provide protection to their people from other BRA groups. In various other places, villagers began to arm to protect themselves locally against the predations of rogue BRA and/or skin BRA groups. Coalescence increased, particularly on Buka Island in the north, as such groups coordinated to form initially the Bougainville Resistance Group, later renamed the Bougainville Resistance Force (BRF). PNG intelligence welcomed this development and began to get support to the Resistance in money and weapons. From about 1992 onwards, the war shifted from one mostly between the BRA and the PNGDF to one mostly among Bougainvilleans—between the BRA and the Resistance (Boege 2006:6). In December 1990 – January 1991, fighting between the BRA and the Buka Liberation Front (BLF) raged all over Buka, with ‘the PNGDF [who had returned to Buka by then] seemingly taking little part in proceedings’ (Spriggs 1992:12). One reason why all this was opening up cracks in the BRA leadership was that many Resistance fighters were former BRA. Bougainville was shaking out into BRA areas, Resistance areas and neutral villages that sought to steer the difficult course of keeping out the BRA, the BRF and the PNGDF. Just as some BRA units had become *raskol* gangs, so too had some BRF units.

Between 1990 and 1992, former PNGDF commander Ted Diro, who for a period was Deputy Prime Minister, was the leader of a hawks’ faction in the PNG Cabinet. This was also the period when the value of Australia’s Defence Cooperation Program funding to support the war peaked. In 1990–91, it was at A\$52 million—compared with its normal level of A\$20 million a year (Claxton 1998:98). Australia supplied light and heavy weapons, aircraft, speedboats, mortars, bombs, helicopters and patrol boats and Australian military advisers were posted in Bougainville (Sharp 1997:2). Australia’s mercenary laws were hastily relaxed to allow Australian and New Zealand civilian pilots to fly Iroquois helicopters provided to Papua New Guinea in 1989. The helicopters were used to drop BRA suspects into the sea, among other atrocities. Also in 1991, Australia belatedly began to come to the view that a military solution would not work. Diro and his hawks’ analysis was that there were times when the BRA leadership was concentrated in Panguna and that it was possible to

surround the mountain and totally decapitate the BRA political and military leadership. Private military contractor Sandline had a similar analysis in 1997. We have taken this analysis seriously in our research because it was advanced by sophisticated, highly trained military men of wide experience. It is certainly a conventional military view that insurgency leaders must meet at times if they are to coordinate well and, when they do, decapitation of the leadership can be effective. We put the Diro analysis to BRA leaders Kauona, Toroama and Kabui. It seems unlikely that if the PNG hawks had had their way in the early 1990s, even if backed by more Australian equipment and training, the BRA would have crumbled. Panguna was in fact only one of four BRA command centres. Leaders at the other three would almost certainly have continued the fight—indeed the imperative for them to do this had been discussed, should all the Panguna-area leaders be killed or captured. Joseph Kabui moved regularly from area to area.

The most dramatic local power struggle—the effects of which have still not healed today—occurred in the south-western district of Siwai. Siwai was a solidly pro-BRA district in the early stages of the war, but then a power struggle broke out in the early 1990s over local BRA leadership and strategy over the return of government services. Allegations of sorcery and disputes over unequal access to land were involved in the local split. One faction controlled the council of chiefs, the other a competing power structure. A group of chiefs on one side of the split invited the PNGDF in to protect them. They became BRF and fought with the PNGDF from the south against BRA control of the north of Siwai. While neither faction could initially marshal the resources to deliver services to people, the faction that went with the Resistance became regionally formidable with financial support from Port Moresby. Nick Penniai, a leader of this group, became the first Speaker of the Bougainville Parliament in 2005 with support from his most prominent BRA enemy in Siwai, Jonathan Ngati, after a large reconciliation ceremony between the two that both claimed left them friends and healed. Power sharing did create incentives for reconciliations such as this that were not just skin deep. Most of the leaders who were at one another's throats in the Siwai crisis were, however, still not reconciled in 2008.

## More failed peace processes

Attempts at peacemaking were almost continuous, even as fighting escalated. The first was Prime Minister Namaliu's Peace Package and large peace ceremony in October 1989 and the almost simultaneous initiative led by Father Leibert of the Catholic Church. In March 1990, the PNG Government, the BIG/BRA and officers of the PNG-backed Provincial Administration reached the cease-fire agreement in response to the more wide-ranging but unsuccessful peace agreement initiated by Graeme Kemelfield (1990, 1992). Further peace talks

were held on the New Zealand Navy ship *Endeavour* in July and August 1990. Papua New Guinea interpreted the Endeavour Accord (Spriggs 1992:28–9), signed by Sir Michael Somare as head of the national government delegation and Joseph Kabui as head of the Bougainville delegation, as a plan for the restoration of government services with security provided for that restoration as needed by the PNGDF. The BRA interpreted it as agreement to the former without the PNGDF. But the PNGDF redeployed, though only into the island provincial capital of Buka across a narrow strait to the north of Bougainville Island in September 1990 in response to a plea from Buka leaders (in reality, it was only certain leaders) for a return of the PNGDF to protect them from the BRA. These leaders signed the Kavieng ‘MOU [memorandum of understanding] Between Buka Community Leaders and the National Government Delegation’ (Spriggs 1992:30–2). By mid 1991, the BLF forces supported by the PNGDF had effectively returned all Buka to PNG control.

Somare and Kabui and their delegations signed the ‘Honiara Declaration’ on 23 January 1991 (Spriggs 1992:33–41). It was an initiative sponsored by the Solomon Islands Government and the Solomon Islands Christian Association. This was a much more comprehensive agreement than had been signed in the 1990 Endeavour Accord. It committed to restoration of services, lifting the blockade and made councils of chiefs agents of an interim legal authority. The BRA agreed to surrender its arms under the supervision of a ‘Multinational Supervisory Team’. The PNG Government agreed to amnesties for combatants. It did not contribute to ending the conflict, with the BRA refusing to surrender its weapons, as agreed in Honiara. BRA military commander Sam Kaouna argued that Joseph Kabui did not have the authority to make this agreement. Neither side honoured much of its part of the agreement. BRA torture and murder of Bougainvilleans who had once worked for the civil service—many of them in fact BRA supporters—that had begun in 1990 were now causing a problem for the BRA/BIG, especially for those who wanted a return of government services, which the people were pleading for. But the BRA was divided on this issue; many did not want a return of government services in any guise. This divide was an important factor in the Siwai crisis. The civil service in Bougainville became in this context an influential ‘bit of the state’ (Filer 1992) because it was unwilling to go along with a peace agreement that put it in the firing line.

On 13 April 1991, the PNGDF launched its second invasion of Bougainville Island across from Buka in breach of the Honiara Declaration, without the approval or support of Cabinet. From this point on, the military was decreasingly under political control from Port Moresby. Local commanders were often fighting their own private little wars ‘that followed the logic of pay back more than instructions from the government in far away Port Moresby’ (Boege 2006:7). The reoccupation gradually moved south, with occasional skirmishes based

on the same strategy that had restored PNG control to Buka. Resistance forces formed locally—in many instances, from former BRA members. They asked the PNGDF to support them in the removal of the BRA and criminal gangs from their lands. The Resistance was armed and supported with other resources from the government. The PNGDF and Resistance pushed the BRA to retreat from control of areas where local chiefs invited the PNGDF in, which the BRA mostly did without a fight. A reconciliation meeting was then held between the local community and the PNGDF. In many cases, the PNGDF just secured enclaves of control surrounded by areas of BRA control. A second front with this strategy was also opened up by a sea landing at Siwai in the south-west, exploiting the divisions that had split open the BRA in Siwai. A PNGDF colonel told us that many of the pacified spaces they created as they moved south fell apart behind them because the PNG Government failed to follow-up by restoring government services after the local peace was established. As the army moved south, the BRA often melted away in front of them, then flowed back around them to the north to reoccupy pacified areas.

## **Hardline Prime Minister Wingti and the succession of an impatient peacemaker**

This strategy did not work in the Nasioi districts of central Bougainville where Francis Ona had started the war. But when hardliner Paias Wingti took over as PNG Prime Minister and increased funding for the Bougainville campaign, PNGDF hawks opted for a new strategy of advancing into the Nasioi heartland of the BRA without invitation from local communities. Arawa was reoccupied in February 1993 after some weeks of moving up from the Loloho area; in August 1994, Wingti prematurely announced the recapture of the mine area around Panguna. But the PNGDF held the area only briefly. The PNGDF suffered many reversals and losses from the insurgency in mountainous jungle where visibility for patrols was only a few metres. Amnesty International also reported a dramatic increase in extrajudicial executions by the military in 1993 (Amnesty International 1997).

Wingti was not in favour of peace talks and rejected the promise in earlier agreements that the BRA would be offered an amnesty. Yet behind the scenes another bit of state, the Department of Foreign Affairs, led by its new minister, Sir Julius Chan, was winning support among South Pacific nations to establish a South Pacific Peacekeeping Force. While the South Pacific Forum rejected the proposal at that time, the seed of what ultimately became a South Pacific peacekeeping operation on Bougainville was planted by this diplomacy. The

head of the Department of Foreign Affairs had discussions with representatives of the BRA/BIG in Honiara chaired by Solomons Island Prime Minister, Francis Billy Hilly, in mid 1994.

We will see in the next chapter that Sir Julius Chan became a catalyst of important peace initiatives. But when he became impatient with their frustrating progress, he triggered a near catastrophe by contracting mercenaries to break the deadlock.