

## THE MILITARY FACTOR IN THE EVENTS OF MARCH 1997\*

In his address to the nation on 17 March, in which he called on the prime minister, deputy prime minister, and defence minister to resign, Brigadier General Singirok claimed to be acting 'as senior citizen and a responsible Departmental Head'. But it is clear from his statement that Singirok's primary concern was, as commander of the PNGDF, with the terms of the contract between the government and Sandline International. 'As a professional military officer', he said:

I have kept quiet and followed orders from this government as I would for any serving government of the day without questioning their orders and directives. And this included the Sandline International project which has brought into question the issues of sovereignty and the credibility of the PNG Defence Force and our own professionalism which the government has greatly undermined . . .

[But] I have cancelled all further activities involving the PNG Defence Force with the Sandline International . . .

It is my professional and ethical view that it is wrong to hire Sandline International to carry out the operations on Bougainville . . .

The amount of money spent on hiring Sandline should be used to buy much needed logistical support and capability to sustain

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*The Military Factor in the Events of March 1997*

current efforts on Bougainville and the other roles of the Defence Force within the country.

These concerns were in part specific to the Sandline contract; but they reflected a much deeper, longstanding, and growing malaise in relations between the government and the armed forces (May 1993).

In the lead-up to independence in 1975 there was a good deal of discussion about whether Papua New Guinea should have an army. At least some people saw a cohesive, well-resourced and disciplined armed force as a potential threat to the government of an independent state. Concerns were also expressed about the prospect of using the military in law and order operations 'in aid to the civil power', and about the relative size and funding of the police and army. Ultimately, however, the decision was taken to have a defence force, and after some resistance to earlier demands, in 1984 the PNGDF was called out to assist police following the declaration of a state of emergency in Port Moresby, in response to rising crime and violence in the capital.

The Defence Force was involved in several more law and order operations before being deployed, in a similar capacity, on Bougainville in 1989. Meanwhile, however, the PNGDF's reputation as a well-resourced and well-disciplined force was coming increasingly into question. Well before the Bougainville campaign it was frequently being observed that the level of training and standards of discipline in the PNGDF were declining, that equipment and accommodation for personnel and their families were deteriorating, and that morale was slipping. As early as 1984-85 a *Defence Report* commented that the standard of discipline in the PNGDF was 'below that required' and some 190 soldiers were discharged. The same year a number of Transport Squadron ground crew staged a strike over pay and conditions. In 1988 the Defence Force defied a government decision to relocate the Air Element from Lae to Nadzab, and the following year between 100 and 200 soldiers marched on the Parliament

to voice their disappointment at lower than expected pay increases. The latter incident resulted in a Defence General Board of Inquiry, which reported a serious decline in discipline, some misuse of funds and equipment, and low morale.

By the mid 1980s, too, the position of PNGDF commander had become politicised and there was growing evidence of factionalism at senior officer levels.

The inability of the security forces to contain the conflict on Bougainville provided further evidence of the PNGDF's limited capacity, though it also reflected the inherent difficulties of this sort of guerilla warfare. Analyses of the Bougainville campaign have pointed to inadequate logistic capacity, poor intelligence, questionable strategy, and poor discipline (see, for example, Liria 1993). Although, according to the late Graeme Kemelfield, the PNGDF was initially welcomed by most Bougainvilleans, after the first few PNGDF casualties the soldiers became increasingly alienated from the people and human rights abuses multiplied.<sup>1</sup>

With the Bougainville conflict dragging on, and morale amongst the troops low, members of the security forces, and their families, accused the political leadership of indecision and lack of commitment to a resolution of the conflict, which some in the Defence Force felt could have been achieved, given the necessary resources and political will, by military means. Security forces personnel resentment resulted in several confrontations with government ministers and officials.

In each year from 1988 actual Defence expenditure exceeded the budget allocation by a significant margin; in 1991 expenditure, at K92 million, exceeded the appropriation by a massive K41.2 million. Notwithstanding this, the PNGDF was unable to meet the cost of its operations on Bougainville. The refusal of local suppliers to keep extending credit for such purposes as air charters, fuel, and general supplies, and the inability of the Defence

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<sup>1</sup> Parliament of Australia, Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Hearing, 22 October 1990, p. 793.

Force to provide adequately for the maintenance of its naval and air craft, meant that its operations on Bougainville were frequently hampered. Shortage of funds also resulted in the non-payment of allowances, and occasionally in delayed salary payments, to soldiers; this became a source of increasing resentment. A *Defence Ten-Year Development Plan* approved by cabinet in 1991 provided for an increase in force size and re-equipment of the Defence Force, but little was done to implement the plan, and in 1993, in presenting a budgetary review of the law and order sector, the Minister for Finance announced that the PNGDF was to be 'scaled down' and directed more towards civic action. A subsequent *Defence White Paper* was tabled in the National Parliament in July 1996; its proposals – more modest than those of the *Ten-Year Development Plan* – remained to be implemented at the time of the 'Sandline affair'. Requests for additional assistance through the Australian Defence Cooperation Program, in particular for upgraded equipment, received little sympathy; this became a point of contention in Australian-Papua New Guinea relations, and added to the growing sense of grievance within the PNGDF.

At the time of the October 1994 Peace Talks in Arawa, hopes for at least substantial progress towards a settlement were high. The failure of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) leadership to attend the talks clearly annoyed Prime Minister Chan, and although discussions continued after Arawa, leading to the formation of the Bougainville Transitional Government (BTG), Chan seems never to have been enthusiastic about the BTG, while the military remained at best suspicious of it and at worst openly hostile. Notwithstanding this, progress was being made in talks between the BTG and the rebels until January 1996 when, following a second round of talks in Cairns facilitated by the Australian government, members of the BRA/BIG delegation were fired upon while returning to Bougainville via Honiara. In the aftermath of this incident, Prime Minister Chan said there would be no further discussions outside Papua New Guinea, and the

armed conflict resumed. Obviously frustrated, annoyed, and anxious for a 'solution' to the Bougainville problem, Prime Minister Chan ordered *Operation High Speed II* against the rebels in June 1996.

*Operation High Speed II* ended disastrously for the security forces, further lowering morale and, it seems, straining relations between Chan and Singirok.

Whatever less worthy motives there may have been behind the Sandline contract, the failure of *Operation High Speed II* promoted the attempt to boost central government's military capacity. The then National Capital District governor, Bill Skate, subsequently described the contract as 'a slap in the face for the PNGDF'; without doubt it was concrete evidence of the government's lack of faith in the security forces' ability to deal with the situation on Bougainville.

Singirok's role, as PNGDF commander and a member of the National Security Council, in the negotiations with Sandline International, is not entirely clear. He was involved in the Sandline negotiations from at least April 1996 and apparently went along with the rather draconian military estimate contained in the December 1996 Project Contravene proposal; within the terms of Project Contravene all personnel 'would be tasked under the full command of Commander of PNG Forces'. The prospect of additional funding and equipment for the security forces' operations must have held some attraction to the Defence Force commander, whose troops, in his own words, had been operating on Bougainville for nine years with 'depleted resources . . . and lack of funding for vital allowances and supplies from successive governments'. In his own words, Singirok initially 'followed orders' on the Sandline contract. But at some point in February-March 1997 he decided that the contract undermined the role of the security forces – specifically the PNGDF (and Singirok's personal position as PNGDF commander) – and impinged upon the sovereignty of the Papua New Guinea state. It also cost money which might be better spent on the PNGDF. More sig-

nificantly, perhaps, Singirok appears to have become concerned at 'the expected backlash as a result of any major military operations on Bougainville which will for ever remain with us' ('Address to the Nation' 17 March 1997).

Another factor in Singirok's change of attitude may have been a letter he received from the acting secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and National Executive Council dated 20 January 1997, in which he was informed that the prime minister had directed that the 'PNGDF Rapid Reaction Force' (presumably the recently established Special Forces Unit) 'be formalised, strengthened and commanded by Police' and be brought administratively under the Department of the PM and NEC. Singirok objected to the shifting of control over the unit to the prime minister, subsequently telling the Sandline inquiry:

I believed strongly that if Sandline is engaged and if the Prime Minister has personal interests in the SFU and Sandline, obviously the SFU will be amalgamated with Sandline and we will have a palace guard. We will not have a Defence Force that represents the Constitution. [*Post-Courier* 10 April 1997]

In making a stand against the Sandline contract, and against those most closely responsible for it, Brigadier General Singirok was thus ostensibly motivated by both moral outrage and by the corporate interests of the military.<sup>2</sup> Both of these are factors which feature large in the literature of military coups.

There was substantial popular support for Singirok's action, but there were also many, including some within the PNGDF itself, who condemned the move as setting a dangerous precedent.

Two of the questions most frequently asked by the foreign media at the time were, 'Is this a coup?' and 'Is the military, "having tasted power", likely to seek a continuing role in politics, as

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<sup>2</sup> In the light of subsequent revelations, concerning payments received by Singirok from British arms dealers J & S Franklin, there may also have been more personal and perhaps venal motives.

in many African [curiously, few journalists said 'and Asian'] countries?'

The answer to the first question ultimately comes down to defining what constitutes a coup. But it is significant, not only that Singirok himself specifically denied that his actions constituted a coup (a claim, however, that many coup leaders make), but also that *Operation Rausim Kwik* (as the action was called) involved no attempt to detain political leaders<sup>3</sup> or occupy the Parliament, nor any attempt to seize radio or TV stations or influence the press – the initial steps of any normal coup. It is also worth bearing in mind that, with national elections only weeks away, there were means close to hand of resolving the issue, within the classic democratic paradigm, 'through the ballot box', and that, when dismissed, Singirok accepted his dismissal. Thus, without in any way downplaying the seriousness of Singirok's action, to describe it as a 'coup' would be to stretch that term well beyond its normal usage.

In addressing the second question, it is well to remember, first, that, though this may be the most serious, it is not the first (and probably will not be the last) confrontation between the elected government and the security forces in Papua New Guinea, and, second, that successive elected governments have tempted such intervention insofar as they have deliberately politicised the position of Defence Force commander – though it is ironic that Singirok, appointed by Chan in October 1995 over several more senior officers, was seen at the time as 'Chan's man'. For some years, most professional observers have been dismissive of the likelihood of a military coup. This view has been based on consideration of logistic factors and the demonstrated incapacity of the small force, even with government support, to resolve the

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<sup>3</sup> Singirok's 17 March statement did contain the statement: 'If the PM and his deputy and Minister for Defence do not step down within 48 hours then I will plea to Papua New Guineans [*sic*] to join hands to force them to resign'; but when the three had not resigned within 48 hours no direct move was made against them.

Bougainville conflict or (with the police) to maintain peace and order in other parts of the country. On the other hand, increasingly we have tended to concede the possibility that the PNGDF (or at least factions of it), perhaps in collaboration with disgruntled or ambitious politicians, might seek to exercise selective influence over government decision making.

In the fallout from the events of March-April 1997 this position remains sustainable. The prime minister, deputy prime minister, and defence minister 'stood aside' pending an enquiry, and two of them subsequently lost their parliamentary seats in the June 1997 election; Singirok was dismissed and in September 1997 was facing charges of sedition. Contrary to the expectations of many people, the PNGDF generally showed remarkable discipline during the popular demonstrations against the Sandline contract, and was largely responsible for defusing a potentially explosive situation outside the National Parliament on 25-26 March (when Prime Minister Chan and his two ministers were persuaded to step aside) after the police had departed the scene, leaving an agitated crowd of demonstrators. A Defence Board of Enquiry has since been set up to review the PNGDF's role in the events of March.

Papua New Guinea's robust democratic system appears to have survived another crisis intact. Nevertheless the March 1997 incident has clearly placed further strains on relations between the government and the military, and has exacerbated divisions within the PNGDF.