

Bougainville's Eco Revolution

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Young Bougainville Fighter. Credit Damain Baker

By Damian Baker:

Blood could again be spilled in the autonomous Papua New Guinea region of Bougainville if negotiations to restart the Panguna gold and copper mine are successful.

Remnant members of the [Bougainville Revolutionary Army](#) (BRA), now known as the Mekamui Defence Force, have said their demands must be met before they will consider any further negotiations over the approval of the mining lease. These include being paid compensation for environmental damage; the declaration of independence for the island and the formation of a strong central government to conduct negotiations.

Local discontent over the environmental and social damage caused by the giant mine, owned by Rio Tinto subsidiary [Bougainville Copper Ltd](#), as well as perceived lack of financial benefits for the local people, was central to the 20-year bloody conflict which took an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 lives.

The conflict, which also triggered the latest phase of a secessionist move, began in the 1970s and did not officially end until 1997 when a peace treaty brokered by New Zealand was signed. Militia were successful in forcing BCL to close the copper mine – the largest open-cut mine in the world – though it remains a catalyst for unrest.

Colonel Alex Dakamari says the Mekamui forces will retain their weapons, as they have yet to achieve independence and warns “blood will be spilled” should recent efforts to reopen the mine go ahead.

The threat came as a result of Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) company secretary Paul Coleman’s visit to the region in early October and the Bougainville Autonomous Government attempts at discussing reconciliation with the mine’s owners.

Mr Coleman arrived for a two-day visit last month at the invitation of Bougainville Autonomous Region President James Tanis, who is seeking to heal old divisions between the Government and the mineowners.

Coleman said in a statement released after the visit that he was “very pleased” to have visited the mine and promised to listen to the people on matters of mutual interest.

“There are many things to discuss, and it is very pleasing to be making a start on these talks, here in the Autonomous Bougainville Region, among the people,” he said. “I thank President Tanis for having the vision and the concern for his people to initiate this meeting,” Coleman said.

The president denied he was negotiating to reopen the mine, saying he was there to facilitate discussions with BCL in an “open and friendly fashion,” it was evident on my arrival in central Bougainville this week that the president’s eagerness on the issue was necessary as the mine’s reopening remains an open wound for many locals.



Panguna Mine, Bougainville. Credit: Damian Baker

Army ‘Ready for Use’

While the Panguna copper mine no longer commands front-page news, General Chris Uma of the Mekamui defence force said that checkpoints leading to the mine were still closed and warned of a well-armed and dedicated army hidden in the mountains ready for use if necessary.

He stated that most of the thousands of Bougainvillians presently going about their everyday lives are ready to take up arms for the cause if called. General Uma and his armed men watch the gate very carefully and interview anybody intending to enter the mine.

They make no bones about the fact that they are excluding anyone remotely interested in the mine as a source of income. Working under and encouraging the clan system, Mekamui believe cultural development is of ultimate importance.

The belief that mining has ruined their environment and hinders this cultural development explains their opposition to the giant mine. They are well versed in the science of global warming and say protection of the environment is a paramount concern for the Defence Force.

The Mekamui leadership says it is standing firm.

“Mining is non negotiable,” General Uma says, pointing to the need to protect the environment with blood if necessary.

“BCL arrived when I was a very small boy in 1963, I have grown up with BCL, I have seen what BCL has done to my people, I know BCL, I know what they are doing here,” he said.

“They took tonnes of gold and copper and never helped the people.”

Executive Director of the [Mineral Policy Institute](#) Charles Roche, who visited the Panguna mine with Colonial Dakamari stated, “it is only when you stand on the banks of the Jaba River, that you can understand the ecological destruction caused by the mine and why the local community are so vehemently opposed to the return of BCL.”

Mr Roche said, “I have seen many open pit mines but the filling of the Jaba river valley with tailings 30 meters deep astounded and appalled me.”

There is division amongst the Bougainville people over whether or not to allow the mine to reopen, with many landowners keen to see negotiations over the mine’s reopening continue.

“As the head of the government of the people of Bougainville, Mr Tanis had taken the issue of BCL head-on instead of putting it on the side burner and on behalf of the PLA executive and the people of Panguna I congratulate him,” the BBC quoted Panguna Landowner Association (PLA) spokesman Lawrence Daveona as saying following the Coleman visit.

However many locals I spoke to said they see stability as of ultimate importance for their island and they do not need the mine as they have land. As Chris Uma and his Mekamui leadership see it, mining does not play a part in an independent Bougainville and his group is not in a rush to reopen the mine as a result.