

PREFACE

North Solomon Province is located approximately 1,000 kilometres north east of the capital of Papua New Guinea, Port Moresby.¹ It comprises two large islands, Buka and Bougainville, and a number of smaller groups of islands. At its southern end, Bougainville is barely 20 kilometres from the neighbouring Solomon Islands.

During the visit, the delegation had ample opportunity to appreciate Bougainville's rugged terrain and the difficulties that geographical factors impose on communications. Thirteen square kilometres of the land mass of the main islands consists of freshwater lakes, and around half of Bougainville's territory is made up of hills and mountains rising to around 2,500 metres. Extensive swamps exist on the west coast as well as in south Bougainville. A large percentage of the land area of the main islands is covered by very dense forest.

After more than nine years of violent armed conflict, the momentum for peace appears to be firmly on the agenda for the people of Bougainville and their leaders, despite occasional setbacks. This was certainly not the case before mid 1997, when the formal peace process began with the signing of the Burnham Declaration.

For almost a decade, the people of Bougainville seemed to be on a mission of self-destruction. More than five per cent of the province's population of 160,000 died in that period, either violently or from preventable diseases. And many of those killed in a violent way died at the hands of other Bougainvilleans.²

Apart from the immense human tragedies of the war in Bougainville, there has been an almost total destruction of the province's infrastructure and economy. Restoration of basic communications, reconstruction of health, education and other facilities, and restoration of essential services, are huge tasks which will take many years, and will require considerable on-going external aid.

Since mid 1997, however, a great deal of progress has been made in resolving the protracted conflict in Bougainville. Today the province is relatively calm, and although there have been isolated killings, there has been no major fighting for almost two years. The daily lives of Bougainvilleans are beginning to return to normal, and freedom of movement has considerably improved. However, there is only limited trading and other commercial activity in evidence, apart perhaps from a brisk trade in scrap materials. As elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, there are law and order problems in some parts of Bougainville.

In conjunction with other regional countries, Australia has made a major contribution to advancing the peace process, through political and diplomatic efforts, through the aid program, and through the work of the Peace Monitoring Group (PMG) in Bougainville. There are very positive signs that the peace dividend is showing results in very practical ways and that the peace process is continuing to move forward.

1 See map of Papua New Guinea Provinces at p. iv.

2 Sean Dorney, *The Sandline Affair*, ABC Books, 1998, p. 37.

This report is intended to be a brief record of the range of discussions held by the delegation during its visit to Port Moresby and Bougainville. The visit was conducted as a fact-finding component of the Committee's current inquiry into the Bougainville Peace Process, and the delegation has formed some preliminary views which are discussed briefly in this report. The Committee (the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade) will present a full report to the Parliament, including specific recommendations, on the basis of the formal evidence it is in the process of gathering.

Within the limits imposed by time and distance, the delegation's four-day visit involved a comprehensive program of meetings, informal discussions and inspections in Port Moresby and in Bougainville. During the visit, the delegation met with most of the key participants in the peace process, except for Resistance leaders who were not in Bougainville at the time of the visit. As a result, the delegation members had an invaluable opportunity to be exposed to a very broad range of perspectives, and to see for themselves the actual situation in Bougainville.

The delegation wishes to thank the Papua New Guinea Government, in particular the Speaker of the National Parliament, the Hon John Pundari MP and senior Government ministers, for extending the invitation to the delegation, for their courtesy and hospitality during the visit, and for the opportunities to exchange views freely. These thanks extend also to senior Opposition members and to the Bougainvillean leaders and community groups, whose contributions to the discussions, and the frankness with which views were able to be exchanged, were very much appreciated by the delegates.

The delegation wishes to express its sincere appreciation to the Australian High Commissioner in Port Moresby, HE Mr David Irvine, and his staff for the assistance provided both before and during the visit. All the arrangements made for the busy program were excellent, and contributed significantly to the success of the visit. The delegation also expresses grateful thanks to the former Commander of the PMG, Brigadier Bruce Osborn, ADF, who accompanied the delegation throughout the visit, and who provided valuable insights into the role of the PMG and its contribution to the peace process.

The delegation travelled to and from PNG by means of regular RAAF supply flights undertaken by No. 37 Squadron. In every sense, these arrangements were excellent. The efforts of the flight crew, and the adjustments which had to be made to the schedules to enable the demands of the visit program to be met, were very much appreciated by all the members of the delegation.

In Bougainville, the PMG provided air, sea and land transportation for the delegation, as well as detailed briefings and overall facilitation of the visit program. To the Commander, Brigadier Roger Powell, and to all the PMG personnel, the delegation expresses its grateful thanks for their professionalism, enthusiasm and support during the recent visit.