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PAPUA NEW GUINEA: THE BOUGAINVILLE CONFLICT

ISSUE

The Government of Papua New Guinea has been struggling to contain an insurgency on Bougainville Island in its North Solomons Island Province since 1988. This has had an impact on the human rights situation there.

BACKGROUND

The PNG Defence Forces (PNGDF) have successfully driven the secessionist rebels who call themselves the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) out of the northern and southern portions of the island. The PNGDF does not have sufficient forces on the Island to effectively counter the BRA in all areas. It has, therefore, resorted to concentrating civilians in safe havens or "care centres", in order to assure them necessary supplies and protection against BRA attacks. BRA resistance has decreased, but the BRA continues to terrorize selected targets. Serious human rights violations have been committed by both the PNGDF and the BRA, but these appear to have decreased since September 1994. The PNGDF has sensibly kept a low profile on Bougainville over the past year, although there have been some lapses by small groups within the 1,000-strong deployment. Insufficient funding, training and discipline in the PNGDF appear to be the principal factors contributing to the perpetration of human rights violations. A Human Rights Commission and a Police Complaints Bureau in Buka (North Bougainville) have been established to investigate human rights complaints. The institution is working well in the Buka region, where it is located and where civil authorities and police are functioning relatively normally. For people living in the central and south areas of Bougainville, the institution's location makes it inaccessible. Residents of these areas take their human rights complaints to either the local council of chiefs or the military and receive some degree of satisfaction. No documentation is kept on the number of complaints received or actions taken.

Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan must be given credit for considerable achievement in getting the peace process going despite failing to get Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) leaders to the peace conference in October 1994. The Charter of Mirigini, which provided for the establishment of a transitional legal body, led to the Bougainville Transitional Government (April 10, 1995). The Waigani Communiqué, signed on May 18 by Sir Julius and Theodore Miriung, the new Premier of Bougainville, announced an amnesty for all parties who committed war crimes during the six-year conflict. Meanwhile, Sir Julius declared publicly that he would favour a "blanket amnesty". The plan received mixed reaction in Bougainville. The measures for the reform of the provincial government system (merging of provincial administrations and central departments), which, in theory, aim at ensuring the delivery of services without political blockages at provincial level, passed third reading in June with bipartisan backing only after Sir Julius agreed to support opposition amendments. The peace process continued in Cairns, Australia, in September 1995 with representatives from the major parties meeting for five days of talks. The agenda was kept

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