



BOUGAINVILLE REFERENDUM FORTNIGHTLY COMMENTARY

By Dr Thomas Webster – Team Leader of the PNG NRI Bougainville Referendum Research Project
and Martha Waim – Project Officer

Disposal of Weapons – Impact on Peaceful Future and on Referendum

Introduction:

Weapons Disposal is one of the Three Pillars of the Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA) that was signed by PNG and Bougainville leaders to end a brutal civil war that saw thousands of lives lost. The leaders who forged the BPA and signed it subsequently did so to achieve “lasting peace by peaceful means” (BPA).

A key commitment made in the BPA was the disposal of weapons which in itself was a significant step towards peace. Peace installed following the signing of the peace agreement has remained for the past 17 years. But it has been common knowledge both within and beyond Bougainville that not all weapons were disposed of.

The initial disposal of weapons was conducted in stages and supervised by the UN who were engaged in that exercise from 1998 to 2005. Their endorsement of a “substantial compliance”, led to the elections in 2005 of the first Autonomous Bougainville Government.

The UN subsequently conducted a study in 2012 which was released to the public as a report titled “United Nations Evaluation of Weapons Disposal in Bougainville”. The report provides insights on the presence of weapons and their consequences and makes recommendations to dispose of the existing weapons before the referendum.

Section 312(b) of the BPA notes that the referendum will be held in-between 10 to 15 years of the election of the first ABG, the dates for the referendum will be decided jointly by the National Government and the ABG, and when the two conditions of ‘weapons disposal’ and ‘good governance’ were met. The two Governments have since set June 15th, 2019 as the “Referendum Target Date”.

What implications does the partial disposal of weapons have on the forthcoming referendum? This commentary draws upon information from the UN study mentioned above as well as from other studies commissioned by the PNG NRI to generate discussions on this important issue.

Brief Background:

The United Nations Political Office in Bougainville (UNPOB) was entrusted with overseeing the disposal of weapons between 1998 and 2005. The weapons were firstly collected and securely stored in containers by combatant unit commanders. They were then delivered to company commanders and stored in double locked containers with one key held by company commanders and the other by UNPOB officials. It was estimated that around 90% of the weapons held by the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) and Bougainville Resistance Force (BRF) were collected. But, the Mekamui Defense Force (MDF), a separate faction of the BRA, withheld around 90% of their weapons.

Some two thousand and fifty-one (2051) weapons were destroyed as part of the weapons disposal plan. However, the UNPOB reported that one hundred and twenty (120) weapons were stolen from the containers after being collected before they could be destroyed.

The UN Report of 2012 notes that progress on weapons disposal slowed down after 2005 when the UNOMB was dismantled.

The UN-report identifies four possible sources of weapons in Bougainville.

- Residual Crisis Weapons which were not handed in and destroyed as part of the BPA weapons disposal plan.
- World War II Weapons in the form of arms and ammunition, around Torokina, which have been recovered and sold as illicit arms.
- Trafficked weapons, channelled via the Solomon Island and being used for security by traders and business owners but also being transported to other parts of PNG, particularly the Highlands region.
- Police Weapons. Whilst the policy is for an unarmed Bougainville Police Service, they do have some arms that are stored and used.



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The Joint Supervisory Body (JSB) at the end of 2017, approved the implementation of a Weapons Disposal Plan as part of a broader reconciliation exercise. No funds have been allocated in the 2018 Budget for the implementation of that plan.

Why is Weapons Disposal Important?

The need for a weapons-free Bougainville is important not only for the goal of permanent peace but also important for the credibility of the Referendum outcome. This is because any remaining weapons have the potential to be seen as having compromised the people's vote.

While weapons disposal may not be a condition for holding the Referendum as has been argued by some commentators, their mere presence can undermine the credibility of the Referendum Outcome.

Whilst the 2012 UN Report noted that: "Despite the presence of a significant number of weapons in Bougainville... the misuse of guns was not cited among the top three problems communities face..." (p.22), there is no room for any complacency on the impact of weapons on the free choice of the people at the referendum

As long as weapons are present on Bougainville, naysayers will question the credibility of the referendum results. Some may argue that the presence of weapons influenced the way individuals cast their votes and so voting was not an act of free choice by an individual as required in a democracy.

Given that the referendum results will be presented to the National Parliament for ratification as well as requiring the support of the international community, it is in Bougainville's best interest to remove all such weapons, well before the referendum is held.

Conclusion.

The mere presence of weapons in Bougainville, for whatever reason, is not conducive for permanent peace that many Bougainvilleans aspire to. A weapons-free Bougainville allows the people to express their free choice on the political future of their autonomous region. This choice is credible when made in an environment free from the threat of weapons.

The PNG Government must help Bougainville free itself of weapons. It needs to take the lead and provide the funds that are essential for the implementation of the second weapons disposal plan as agreed. Furthermore, it is essential that the National Government and the ABG work with our international partners to implement the weapons disposal plan in full and well before the conduct of the Referendum.

Finally, we need to reassure the people of Bougainville that the Referendum will be conducted and implemented in accordance with the Spirit of the Bougainville Peace Agreement such that any remaining doubts amongst Bougainvilleans who may be thinking otherwise are eliminated.

For further information, please read the following available from; Referendum.Research@pngnri.org

1. Bougainville Peace Agreement. (2002)
2. United Nations Evaluation of Weapons Disposal in Bougainville (November-December 2002).

Authorised for release by:
Dr. Osborne Sanida
PNG NRI Director

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