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Strengthening communities for peace in Bougainville

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Brief history of the conflict

The armed conflict on Bougainville caused a lot of pain and suffering for innocent people. Atrocities were committed by the armed forces and an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 people were killed. All administrative, social and economic services came to a standstill at the height of the conflict in 1999. Nearly ten years of war have resulted in the almost total destruction of the island's economic and social infrastructures. Health centres and school buildings were burnt to ashes. Government infrastructures were an easy target.

The Bougainville conflict initially started as a land issue among the landowners from Panguna copper mine. There was disagreement about how royalties were being paid. As a result, Francis Ona led a faction which was not happy with the operation of the mine and which demanded more royalties from it. Other major issues included environment concerns, compensation for damage done to the land, employment, and maximum participation of Bougainville in business spinoffs.

Right from the early stages of the mining project, landowners were totally opposed to it. At the same time, there was no proper negotiation between the government, developer and resource owners. The agreements signed did not take on board the real wishes of the resource owners.

In addition, the issue of secession is not new for Bougainville. In the late 1960s, it petitioned the United Nations for the island to be administered by the United States. Many people had a long-harboured resentment against the colonial administration. They felt that Bougainville was getting less attention from the central government and little government service. The lack of genuine response from the national government resulted in the province declaring its independence on 1 September 1975.

At the political level, the Bougainville people realised earlier in the 1960s that the Australian colonial administration was highly centralised and that its decision making processes were dominated by the bureaucracy. Bougainville leaders wanted to see the political process brought closer to their people.

Since it began in 1988, the conflict has escalated to unexpected political, economic and social complexities. It has crippled the nation financially, greatly sabotaging the national economy in the early 1990s. Our people did not expect that such an upheaval would cause so many deaths, suffering and destruction. We were indeed puzzled that what was a land rights struggle could cause the loss of many lives.

Experience of women during the conflict

Women were the victims from day one of the conflict. At its height, freedom of movement to attend to family needs – for example, to go to the garden and collect food – was very much restricted.

The well-being and advancement of women and their important social and economic role was suppressed during the ten-year conflict. There were many unwanted

pregnancies. Many women died during childbirth. It was heartbreaking to see a woman die in front of you. You were helpless to do anything, except cry and cry, even if there was a qualified nurse with you. What could she do with no medicine? Our women were simply not safe and secure, even at home.

The armed conflict had an immense impact on the women of Bougainville. Women felt the most pain, trauma and loss because of their place in the society, for example:

- rape, torture and abuse were inflicted by the armed forces;
- freedom of movement and speech was very restricted. Women were not free to express their views openly on issues affecting them;
- many women died during childbirth;
- many women lost their loved ones (husbands, sons, daughters);
- there was an increase in the number of single mothers;
- many wives were deserted by their husbands; and
- there was a total breakdown of family values.

Women's involvement in the peace process

As a result of the countless problems they encountered, the women have taken an active role in the process of finding a lasting solution to the conflict. The war has taught us many lessons. I am sure the government, churches and private sector have taken stock of all the failures that it created. Women's groups also are very much aware of the lessons of the conflict and many of them are now involved in a number of community rehabilitation programmes.

The conflict has brought about many changes and challenges. New roles are being imposed on our women. In short, new roles need new approaches. We need a new vision that can be put into practice for the betterment of our women. This is an important task that needs expertise and funding. Bougainville will not be the same again politically, economically or socially.

Our women have a special place in our society. They are mothers, teachers, owners of land. They have traditional values and responsibilities. This is to name only a few of their important roles. Bougainville is predominantly a matrilineal society. Under the traditional system, women are responsible for making decisions on the use of the land. The cultural rights of women have been suppressed since foreign colonisation of the island. Women are naturally well placed in the Bougainville social system so that they are well respected by men. This means that women are also in a better position to influence our leaders to restore peace.

There is a great need to strengthen the reconciliation programmes. Also, psychological services for the counselling and healing of women are required. A survey has revealed an alarming statistic: there are more than 2,000 widows in the province. This disadvantaged group needs assistance to support their families and to equally participate in the development of Bougainville. All women need to be given the chance to be involved in decisions that affect their lives.

The Leitana peace plan

The Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency came into existence as a result of the pain, suffering and violence inflicted on women during the conflict. It is a non government organisation (NGO) based on Bougainville and is registered with the investment promotion authority of Papua New Guinea.

The main aim of the organisation is to reduce gender violence on Bougainville. To this end, it organises workshops and campaigns, carries out community education awareness and advocates on behalf of women on issues affecting them. It also encourages increased support for women's programmes at the national and provincial government levels.

Since the agency was established in 1992 it has helped women and children in the areas of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation, skills training and working for peace and development. Through its network on Bougainville, it provides counselling to women victims of the armed conflict. Simultaneously and in a small way, it provides in-house counselling to women affected by domestic violence. The majority of cases are domestic violence, rape and child abuse victims, but incest, and verbal and sexual harassment are also common. I believe that there are a lot of women on Bougainville who are in need of help but who are unfortunately not able to present themselves for counselling by trained counsellors.

The agency places more emphasis on preventive rather than curative measures. It advocates a non-violent approach to conflict resolution. The following activities are carried out in the effort to reduce the high rate of violence against women:

- raising social awareness about the consumption of homebrew alcohol (this is a major concern related to gender and community violence);
- provision of counselling and support for victims of gender, family and community violence;
- advocacy work to increase awareness of the roles of women in decision making about issues affecting their lives; and
- facilitating community workshops on gender sensitivity.

Women have played a very active role in working alongside government and village elders in attempting to find a peaceful solution to the Bougainville conflict. Their involvement in many peace initiatives has been witnessed by numerous peace ceremonies throughout the island. Women were able to organise themselves and talk to the armed forces on the island to lay down arms. This had proven to be a successful process in most cases.

Strengthening Communities for Peace project

Leitana Nehan Women's Development Agency is currently involved in the Strengthening Communities for Peace project in Bougainville, funded by AusAID and co-managed by the agency and the International Women's Development Agency. Under a two-year agreement (2000–01), the project entails the following programmes: homebrew awareness; counselling; violence against women; advocacy on women's rights; and integral human development. The other programmes carried out by the agency are youth mobilisation and skills training.

The first year of the project (2000) involves volunteers visiting communities and schools and carrying out workshops on homebrew alcohol awareness, violence against women, and counselling. In the second year (2001), the agency will mainly focus on integral human development. The volunteers are located in all areas on Bougainville, supported by the communities.

Existing programmes

The work of rehabilitation and reconciliation on the island is a mammoth task for all parties, including NGOs, who are using their own resources to find a lasting solution to

the conflict. The following groups are heavily involved in the peace process: national and provincial governments; Council of Chiefs; youth; women; churches; and NGOs. Assistance is also provided by Australia and New Zealand and others too numerous to mention.

Conclusion

A lot remains to be done on the peace process. There has to be personal and community reconciliation. I believe that not enough effort is being put into these very important areas in order for Bougainville to enjoy a safe and peaceful future. More rehabilitation and healing programmes are needed.

Although there will always be day-to-day problems and crises along the path towards a lasting peace, it is worth reflecting on just how far the parties have come in barely two years since the peace process started: there has been no fighting during that time.

People are now going about their daily lives without fear, attending to family needs and travelling more widely on the island. The economy is showing the first signs of activity. There is now a ray of hope for the peace process. Things are slowly returning to normal. Children are going back to school, and health centres are providing much-needed health services to the rural masses.

Bougainville women fully support the work done by the national government and Bougainville leaders in finding a lasting peace solution to the conflict. We, the women of Bougainville, endorsed the non-violent approach to the peace process taken by the ex-combatants.

We also very much appreciate, and consider essential, the presence of the Peace Monitoring Group, comprising Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Vanuatu. The United Nations representatives have done an excellent job and their presence has helped to build confidence throughout the province.

The fragile peace has to be nurtured carefully but we are moving in the right direction. After nine years of fighting, Bougainvilleans have been able to come together and discuss the overall process with open hearts and minds.