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Evènements en 2021

After the first outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2021, the fragile Papuan hospital system was overwhelmed by a record number of new cases in the autumn, following the arrival of the Delta variant. While other countries in the region were able to regain control of the health situation with vaccinations, less than 1% of the inhabitants of the archipelago had received two doses by the end of October 2021. One critical challenge in providing vaccinations has been the continued isolation of many regions, compounded by a severe lack of infrastructure. Furthermore, rampant disinformation regarding access to services, vaccination and the pandemic generally has resulted in poor adherence to public health protocols. Across Papua New Guinea, violence remains endemic, and it is estimated that a third of the population lives below the poverty line. Melanesia's largest economy, which is teeming with natural resources and benefits financially from geostrategic competition between China and Australia, has asked for help from the international community.⁵

Bougainville – independence referendum

On 7 July 2021, Bougainville's leaders set a deadline of 2027 for obtaining full independence and leaving Papua New Guinea. Talks continued throughout 2021 on the future of the Melanesian island, which has been torn apart for ten years by armed conflict.⁶ Bougainville residents voted 97.7% for independence in 2019 in a referendum under the 2001 peace agreement that set out a roadmap, including the creation of an autonomous government or a referendum by 2020.⁷

The PNG government has so far accepted the results of this consultation despite concerns that Bougainville's departure will fracture the country. A rejection of independence would risk reviving separatist tensions to the detriment of peace.

Former rebel leader, Ishmael Toroama, elected president of Bougainville in September 2020,⁸ and PNG Prime Minister James Marape, met in the town of Wabag to try and agree on the way forward.

“The message is clear – this long journey must end and the sooner the better,” Toroama said, adding that independence must be achieved “no later than 2027”. He asked the central government not to try to thwart the process. For his part, Marape said an agreement on an “outcome” should be worked out by 2030, leaving the door open to some sort of independence. *“The process cannot be rushed. The future of our country is at stake,”* he said as talks continued. *“My job is to ensure that the rest of the country remains united.”* *“There is nothing to fear from an independent Bougainville,”* Toroama told them on Tuesday. Bougainville will have new national symbols and a new international border, but Bougainville will remain a Melanesian brother.”⁹

Panguna Mine, Bougainville

On 21 July 2021, Rio Tinto agreed to look into the environmental and human legacy of its gigantic Panguna mine.¹⁰ After 32 years, Rio Tinto has agreed to assess the impact of its former mine, following an agreement with Bougainville community members,

represented by the Human Rights Law Centre. As reported by Business & Human Rights Resource Centre: “This follows several months of constructive discussions facilitated by the Australian National Contact Point (AusNCP) for the OECD Guidelines.”¹¹ Chief among the concerns is the accusation that Rio Tinto evaded its responsibilities in cleaning up toxic waste from the Panguna site, which was once the largest open-pit copper mine in the world and alone accounted for up to 40% of Papua New Guinea's exports. The mine was in full operation from 1972 to 1989, when Rio Tinto closed the mine as Papua New Guinea descended into Civil war.

“This is an important first step towards opening a dialogue with those who have been impacted by the legacy of the Panguna mine,” said Group CEO Jakob Stausholm. “We take this topic very seriously and are determined to identify and assess the role we may have had in any negative impact.”¹²

As a first step, Rio Tinto will fund an independent panel of international experts to assess this impact. While it is expected that this announcement should galvanize organizations campaigning for the creation of a compensation fund for victims and for environmental restoration, it is clear that the agreed assessment is only the first step in addressing the conflict and legacy surrounding the mine.

Notes and references

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