

## **The 'Diplomatic Vacuum' caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in post referendum Bougainville**

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### **Abstract**

COVID-19 pandemic potentially has an adverse impact that foreshortened Bougainville's development interventions of traditional foreign aid donors. Typically, the pandemic creates a vacuum that creates an opportunity for emerging donors, attracting Bougainville given the dire need for 1989-98 post-conflict re-development critical to its aspirations for a new nation chosen by people in 2019 referendum. Bougainvillean autonomy laws provide for securing foreign aid in consultation with PNG, its parent state. A strategic option for traditional donors to maintain the aid status-quo is to align aid to thematic areas of Bougainville's re-development aligned to its independence aspirations.

### **Introduction**

This 'In Brief' explores the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Autonomous Bougainville Government's (ABG) international diplomatic efforts in the post-referendum period. The outbreak of the pandemic occurred at the critical political juncture when Bougainvilleans overwhelmingly (97.7%) voted for independence from the rest of Papua New Guinea (PNG) (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2019). In implementing the referendum outcome, the ABG and PNG national government are currently in the consultation phase, as set out in the PNG Constitution and the Peace Agreement (BPA). This paper first describes the provisions in the PNG's Constitutions and the BPA for the ABG to conduct foreign relations. It then highlights a Bougainvilleans' perception on how the pandemic has significantly reduced presence of traditional aid partners, particularly Australia and New Zealand, creating a diplomatic vacuum. It then argues that this vacuum may lead to a shift to paying for attention to other China-led Asian donors. In Bougainville securing diplomatic relation with international community is seen as a crucial next step on the path to realization of their political aspirations for independence.

### **Bougainville's foreign relations within the autonomy arrangements**

Under the Bougainvillean autonomy arrangements' categorization of powers and functions the foreign affairs is retained by the national government, as provided for by section 289(2)(e) of the PNG Constitution (1975), until such time that Bougainville's political future is fully determined. In this section of the constitution foreign aid is specifically mentioned as falling under the category of foreign relations. Article 69 of the Bougainville Peace Agreement (2001) states that the national government and the ABG will establish mechanisms for consultation in agreed areas of foreign affairs. Details of the arrangement for the ABG to obtain foreign aid are provided for under articles 172-177 of the BPA as follows.

Article 172: The agreed arrangements for foreign relations will also apply to foreign aid (consultation mechanism, and Bougainville representation on delegations).

Article 173: The National Government will do its best to obtain foreign aid to support restoration and development in Bougainville, and to facilitate the autonomous Bougainville Government's participation in managing aid projects.

Article 174: The autonomous Bougainville Government will be able to obtain foreign aid.

Article 175 states that the National Government will approve foreign aid secured by the autonomous Bougainville Government, which does not reduce the value of aid already available to Papua New Guinea – and subject to overriding foreign policy considerations.

Article 176: The autonomous Bougainville Government will keep the National Government fully informed of its efforts to obtain foreign aid.

Article 177: The National Government will co-operate with the autonomous Bougainville Government by negotiating such international agreements as may be required to finalize foreign aid prospects identified by the autonomous Bougainville Government.

From these provisions it is clear that under autonomy arrangement the ABG is required to work collaboratively with the PNG Government in managing its foreign affairs including efforts to obtain foreign aid, until its political future is fully realized. This implies that Bougainville can pursue new foreign relations in co-operation with PNG Government.

### **Managing COVID-19 in Bougainville**

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke-out in March 2020, traditional aid partners Australia and New Zealand and the ABG worked together to help protect Bougainville from COVID-19. This was a partnership project with the Government of PNG and the ABG's Department of Health and Bureau of Media and Communications, where Australia and New Zealand provided over PGK400,000 for technical assistance and support to disseminate information to local communities on how to prevent the spread of the virus (Australia Government: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019). Upon detection of the first COVID-19 case (who was an expatriate mine worker) in PNG, the parent state of Bougainville, in April 2020 strict preventive measures were introduced. These included total ban on all international flights into PNG for a lengthened period of time. Under the autonomous government status, Bougainville had jurisdiction to have ABG's Chief of Police erected as its' own COVID-19 controller and impose its own regulations, separate from the rest of PNG (Garda World, 2020). The strictness of Bougainville's COVID-19 measures was somewhat similar to that of many international communities (Radio New Zealand, 2020).

### **Impact of COVID-19 on Bougainville's foreign relations**

The pandemic has forced any foreigner workers living in various parts of PNG, including Bougainville, to go home, as well as forcing the scaling down of operational/functional activities related to development assistance in almost all areas (PNG: Australian High Commission, 2020). Notably, the pandemic has created a situation where Australian Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) advisers have had to leave. In 2017-18 there were about 22 DFAT advisors stationed in Bougainville, but by 2020, not a single adviser remained. This diplomatic vacuum created by COVID-19 could have significant consequences. The potential now exists for a shift from ABG looking into traditional allies to seeking Asian partners. By 2021, after invention and certifying of COVID-19 vaccine for use by the World Health Organization (2021), the travel restrictions were relaxed, the traditional aid partners commenced returning to Bougainville. However, their level of influence remains very minimal with only one expatriate adviser stationed in Buka in 2021. To date, road works and other related works are still deteriorating, although by August 2021, Australia had initiated small community project grants.

### **Potential Asian interventions in Bougainville**

This may attract renewed interests from other aid partners including those from Asia, based on their recent interests to align with Bougainvilleans. The Japanese aid is evident in 15 bridges, which enabled free flow of people, goods and services along the Arawa-Buka main trunk road (Japanese International Corporation Agency (2012). Chinese attempted several partnerships with the ABG oriented aid investments including Jaba Resources Limited, but deserted many due to legal compliance and land dispute issues (Jaba Resources Investment, 2016). Additionally, as reported by McDonald (2019), ahead of the 2019 referendum, rumors emerged that a Chinese delegation had offered US \$1 billion to fund the transition to independence along with pledges to invest in mining, tourism and agriculture. Critics such as Crowther (2019), Boyd (2019), and Powles (2019) argued this could have been China's strategy to gain control over the huge Bougainville copper mine worth about \$US60bn at Panguna which was closed in 1990 following a local landholder rebellion, apart from the diplomatic and strategic

significance of the island. Taiwan wrote to ABG's newly elected president, Ishmael Toroama, and offered to help with education opportunities and other development programs (Lepani, 2020). South Korea pledged multibillion worth investment to Bougainville on various development projects. As reported by *PNG Facts* (2019), under the investment deal, the South Koreans made a commitment to invest more than PGK 4 billion into the Bougainville economy while venturing into the development of downstream processing of timber products as well as developing key infrastructure like roads, sea ports and airports.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 has created a situation where traditional aid partners particularly, Australia and New Zealand have in many respects scaled down on assisting Bougainville in many respects. The winding down in many areas, including human resource advisory support and a freeze on road and infrastructure maintenance is evident to Bougainvilleans that a gap is opening up in the aid sector in Bougainville. This is the scenario referred to as diplomatic vacuum which opens doors for emerging partners, especially Asians to enter Bougainville. As seen above, China, Japan, Taiwan and Korea are some of the Asian giants that already have vested interests in Bougainville. Bohane (2020) has noted that in the current geo-political environment, Australia, Bougainville's traditional partner, has less room to manoeuvre than it once did pursuing its strategic interests in this region of Pacific. To assist Bougainville for economic recovery from the 1989-98 conflict's massive destructions now worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional aid partners may look to sustain diplomatic ties with the ABG through continued funding tied to Bougainville's development needs in this critical post-referendum consultation period.

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