

Breakthrough at Bougainville

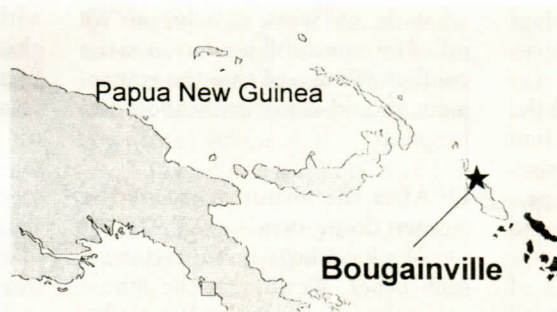
by Concepcion Garcia Ramilo

One year ago, 700 women of Bougainville gathered in Arawa, the island's center, for the Inter-Church Women's Forum to talk about how to end the armed conflict that has so far killed 10,000 people. The gathering was the first attempt to bring together the war experiences, and different perspectives of Bougainville women on achieving peace towards a resolution of the 9-year-old conflict.

Bougainville is located six kms north of the Solomon Islands and about 1,000 kms east of Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea. It has a land area of 8,000 square kilometers and a population of 160,000. Armed conflict between the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) and Papua New Guinea forces broke out in 1988 when the former initiated a military campaign seeking Bougainville's independence and financial compensation for land occupied by the Bougainville Copper Mine, a company jointly owned by the Papua New Guinea government and the Australian Conzinc Rio Tinto.

In retaliation, the Papua New Guinea government imposed a total blockade on the island. The war and the blockade forced people to move constantly to escape the Papua New Guinea soldiers and strafing from helicopters. Because of the blockade and because little attention was being paid to their health and nutrition, people died of preventable diseases. Young women were dying in childbirth because there was no medication to stop bleeding after the birth. Women described their young babies

dying of neonatal sepsis infection, which is preventable with antibiotics. In one village of 2,000 people, a nurse reported 80 maternal deaths between 1990-94, 140 deaths of children under 5 and 130 stillbirths. These are staggering figures, which greatly affect a small community. The worst part is that nearly all were entirely unnecessary if simple medicines had been allowed in the area. Since hostilities began, around 7,600 civilians have died as a result of lack of medical facilities.



Last October, a breakthrough was achieved in the latest attempt to restart peace talks. Officials from the warring factions, including the Papua New Guinea Government, held peace talks at the Burnham Army Camp in Christchurch. After the two-week discussions, a truce was declared in the island of Bougainville. The truce calls for an immediate stop to the armed conflict on the island for all parties to work towards reconciliation and for a return to normalcy of government services. The third round of talks, hosted by the Australian government, was scheduled from 19-21 November in the northern Australian city of Cairns.

In the following years since war erupted in Bougainville, the BRA and

the BTG have struggled for control over the island. In 1990, the BRA through the Bougainville Interim Government, unilaterally declared independence of the island from Papua New Guinea. This led to an escalation of the national government's offensive against the rebel movement. Fighting abated in 1994, when the Bougainville Transitional Government was established as a result of a cease-fire agreement between the government and the BRA. However, the respite from the war was short-lived with the breakdown of the peace negotiations in 1996.

The women came to Arawa, where the war broke out and which remains the center of hostilities, at the risk of their own security. Many of them walked down from mountains, along beaches and across river mouths to avoid armed patrols and checkpoints. The Forum brought to the surface a long list of human rights abuses against women in the ongoing war. This list included the curtailment of movement through curfews and care centers as well as limits to what one can buy and sell in the market was commonplace. Women were being interrogated, arrested, raped and even murdered. Villages were being looted, burned and sprayed with chemicals that kill animals and plants. At the end of the seven-day forum, the courage of the women and their passionate conviction in ending the war and culture of violence in their island were translated in the following calls of action:

- ◆ Peace talks are a priority. The

Papuan New Guinea (PNG) Government, Bougainville Transitional (BTG) Government and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) must continue to talk to each other in organized peace talks under the auspices of an international third party to continue to search for genuine peace and reconciliation on the island.

- ◆ Care centers should be demolished and people be allowed to go back to their villages where they can have their gardens and take care of themselves.
- ◆ People with traumatic experiences in Care Centers should be helped.
- ◆ Communication and transport services should be restored.
- ◆ NGOs and church agencies should be allowed to participate in the rehabilitation program of the government and be granted access to reach out to village people.

The women presented their position to the three parties at the center of the conflict. They also embarked on a campaign to encourage more Bougainvillean women to participate in the peace process.

As the warring parties and the international community try to find a lasting solution to this armed conflict, the people of Bougainville persists in their own quest for peace and justice.

Three of the brave women of Bougainville was at Isis International early this year and shared with us their struggle. Concepcion Garcia-Ramillo recorded the exchange but we are keeping their identities so as to protect them from harm.

Q: How did the idea of an inter-church women's forum start and how did you organize this forum?

The idea of organizing a forum started in one of our church meetings. At that time a woman from the Uniting Church of Australia came to visit us. She offered the help of the Uniting Church in providing funds to organize a forum that will bring women from all over Bougainville. Many of us thought that this was a good idea because it will bring women from different denomina-

tions in one gathering and it will be a voice of women in Bougainville.

The first meeting happened in the beginning of 1994. And in 1995, we began our preparations for the forum. We went to Arawa and talked to the women's leaders there. We collected all the ideas together and brought this back to our main committee.

We formed sub-committees of women in many areas. And the information passed on through word of mouth: women contacting other women.

Q: What did you talk about in the seven-day meeting?

In the first few days we talked about what the war has done to our families and to ourselves. Women from all over Bougainville spoke of their pains and their fears but they also showed their courage and resolve to bring back peace in our home. On the last day, we focused on our vision, on answering the question: what do we want to achieve? We called for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. We agreed that the government should construct schools and hospitals.

Q: After the forum, what are the women doing now?

We have kept in contact with each other. We inform the whole network of our activities. We are also reaching out to our villages to raise awareness of what we women can do towards achieving peace in our island.

Q: What are your future plans?

We have already planned to bring together these women to assess what we have been able to achieve.

Q: What was the most valuable contribution of this forum?

It was bringing women together, gathering their strength, giving them the opportunity to work together in the peace process. The women and chiefs support each other.

We live in constant fear and this forum has lessened this fear.

After the forum, 15 of us who attended all went back to our village

and talked to our people. And we got support from everyone, including the men. Moving from one village to another and sharing our vision for peace for our people have broken the fear that envelops us all. Now, we have gained the confidence to voice out our opposition to the escalating war and face the men with confidence.

Q: How are you involved in the peace process in your country?

I graduated a few years ago, but you see my heart is always with my people, so I always wanted to go back. I studied in a university in Papua New Guinea. I did not think of getting involved in any of this work. But while I was staying with my family, one of the chiefs suggested that the peace committee, which was already established at this time, make use of me, an educated person. So they called me to join them.

I am the liaison officer. I talk with the rebels; we hold meetings with the chiefs. I work among the chiefs. We go to the villages. In Bougainville, we have a tribal clan system. A chief from one clan cannot talk to a rebel from another clan.

Part of my job is organizing meetings. I tell the chiefs to gather their boys and I identify what kind of audience we should have for this meeting. We cannot mix them together, otherwise, there will be confusion. We talk separately to the youth and we have meetings of women. I talk to the women about how they can talk to their sons who are in the BRA.

Q: As the only woman, are there difficulties or advantages working among men?

I do enjoy working with men, so I find no difficulties at all. And one thing, the men really like me because the men are always in danger facing the military so they were really happy that I was with them. If the military requests to see a chief, I go with them because when I am there, they will not harass the chiefs.

Of course, there have also been dangers. At first the rebels thought

that I was a military agent because I studied in Papua New Guinea. But the chiefs and I explained that I was one of their sisters. Now they know me very well.

Q: [To another woman] Were you involved in politics before the war?

I was involved but I was not this strong. The crisis itself has made me somebody who would say that I have a responsibility in these things. I have a responsibility for my children's future. I have four children. I am a teacher by profession, a primary school teacher. I am lucky because only a part of my school was destroyed by the Papua New Guinea military's bombings.

Q: How has the war changed your life?

The war has made me stronger. I don't have any fear anymore. All I know now is to stand up and be vocal about the injustices that are done to my people.

Q: Let's talk about the ongoing peace process. You mentioned the setting up of the transitional government and the 1994 peace negotiations. What are the agreements between the government and the Bougainville Transitional Government (BTG)?

They agreed that peace negotiations should continue. The BTG is telling the Papua New Guinea government that there is no military solution to this crisis. We still have to continue talking; we need to have a peaceful dialogue. Then we have to talk to our youth, the rebels who are in the BRA. The Papua New Guinea government labels the BRA as criminals so they [the PNG government] refuses to talk to the rebels. So we say let the local people, their fathers, mothers and their chiefs talk to them to lay down their arms.

Q: How does the PNG government respond?

They are saying the situation is all right. But the shooting from the military still continues. The government must remove the military.

We are telling Papua New

Guinea to withdraw the military from the island and let us seek the solution ourselves.

Q: What do you see are the steps towards achieving peace?

The Papua New Guinea government is saying that this is a criminal issue. We are saying that this is a political issue. So the basic grievance of the people must be addressed. And the basic grievance is that they have been left out in all the decisions of government.

Q: What are the other major grievances of the people?

The people of Bougainville have long wanted to be left alone by the Papua New Guinea government. Ethnically, our race is not part of the Papua New Guinea. We should have a say about the things we have on the island, about our own resources. It is because these things were not addressed so we are having this crisis.

Q: You say that you'd like more autonomy, do you think that this will lead to independence? Do you see this as leading towards a separate state from PNG?

Later on it can lead to that.

Q: Is independence a popular cause among the Bougainville people?

Yes, but they don't shout it. But in their hearts, they really want it.

Q: Is this what the BRA wants?

They want total independence; they want a separate state. When the BTG was established, the BRA thought that the Papua New Guinea government is already here. They said that they did not want a Papua New Guinea backed transitional government. They believed that this is another way of taking them back to the Papua New Guinea government. So we had to convince them that the BTG is not just an extension of the PNG government. Then they realized that the BTG is a step towards what they want to achieve. What we are saying is that we cannot gain something by shooting. We have to sit down and talk.

In our culture, warring parties can fight. They fight but then there is always a point where they have to sit down and negotiate for what they want.

You've fought enough. For nine solid years, you've killed, you've raped and all those kinds of things. Now you stop it. Now it is time to talk.

Q: What do you mean by laying down arms but not surrendering?

Surrender means giving your arms to the enemy. Then you have no power. When we say lay down your arms, we mean for you to put it down. You can even give it to your chief to hold it for you. That is the difference. Nobody has won the war. It is still going on. What we are trying to do is to get them to lay down their arms and not to give these to the defense force.

Q: You said that there have been instances when fighters who have laid down their arms and returned to their villages were shot. How can you convince more if they are harassed?

When rebels lay down their arms we also caution them against exposing themselves to the military. It is wiser for them to stay in their village, with their families.

Q: What is your message to other women?

Women can be peacemakers. We must see ourselves as women who are bearing the population, who are actively take part in the development of our people.

Please think of your sisters in Bougainville. We are still surviving. ♪

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