

# Bougainville violence threat comes from minority says expert

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Threats from hardline supporters of a separatist group on the Papua New Guinea Island of Bougainville against the re-opening of the mine there are not representative of what most people there think.

That's according to Dr Tony Regan, from the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia program at the Australian National University in Canberra.

A group calling itself the Mekamui Hardliners says negotiations about reopening the Panguna copper and gold mine are not taking place with their members, who they say are the real landowners, and not others who live in Port Moresby.

They're threatened a return to violence if the mine reopens, saying all it takes is one bullet to stop it.

Dr Regan says the Mekamui faction does represent some landowners, but it's a minority, and most Bougainvillians are in favour of getting the mine operational again.

**Presenter:** Bruce Hill

**Speaker:** Dr Tony Regan, from the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia program at the Australian National University

DR REGAN: I understand the group of Bougainvilleans living in Melbourne and in Solomon Islands, however they do go back to Bougainville where they're from and they are in touch with people in Bougainville who still are opposed to mining, some on cultural grounds, some on environmental grounds, but in general there's never been a huge level of opposition to mining in Bougainville. The conflict is not originally about total opposition to mining. It was much more about the unfairness of the distribution of revenue and benefits from the mine. Even Francis Ona has wrongly portrayed, the original leader of the BRA, he's wrongly portrayed by many in Australia as an environmental warrior. He wasn't. He was somebody who was using the environmental issues and the damage from the environment from the mine as a way of emphasising the point that the damage being done in Bougainville was significant and the revenue should be flowing much more to Bougainvilleans. And when he became a secessionist, he envisaged the mine being the main source of revenue to an independent Bougainville.

HILL: What's the sentiment on reopening the mine on the island at the moment, because I remember at the end of the Bougainville civil war, I spoke to Sam Kauona and Joseph Kabui, two of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army leaders and asked them if they ever thought the mine would reopen and they were both vehemently opposed to it and said no, it started this war, we don't want it happening ever again.

DR REGAN: Yes, and in due course, both of them have become supporters of the reopening of mining, because it was clear that without mining, it was going to be difficult to get the revenue needed to make Bougainville autonomy work or for independence to be realistic. So there's been a significant swing of opinion from people who were originally thought after the conflict, that the conflict had been caused by mining and therefore we should avoid mining, to a much more open opinion on it. However, there still is a significant minority of Bougainvilleans opposed to mining. But basically the threat is not particularly important, because it's been made very clear by the Bougainville government, by BCL, by the National Government that in the end, the opening of the mine is a matter for the Bougainville government to decide, ask for consultation with the people and if there's strong views against mining, it's very unlikely that anyone's going to want to invest the three or four billion US dollars that's going to be required to reopen the mine. And so threats really aren't necessary. It's clear that all views are going to be taken into account.

HILL: Well, the president of the autonomous government, John Momis, has said that they want mining to restart, they want foreign investment, but to get foreign investment, they're going to have to ensure that they're investment is safe, which is why they want to get all the guns off people and he's threatened if that doesn't work, RAMSI-style intervention forces might be needed. Is that something that's possible or likely?

DR REGAN: It would be very difficult to organise an international intervention in Bougainville again, but not impossible. The UN remains very interested in Bougainville, the region remains very interested. The problem that the president is talking about is very real. There's significant numbers of weapons in Bougainville and there's been many efforts made in the last five years, since the first significant weapons disposal, both are supervised by the UN ended, to get weapons out and they've not been very successful. So what the president is saying is that if the leaders of the group that are holding weapons cannot get together with communities, find a way of ensuring all groups feel secure enough and safe enough to give up their weapons, then serious alternatives are going to have to be looked at. So he's really just signalling to people think about this and of course disposal of weapons is not merely about mining. Of course, it's going to be necessary to have the disposal of weapons if mining is to go ahead, but there are many other significant reasons why Bougainvilleans want the weapons got rid off, including just the threat to security and peace of the ordinary people, the use of weapons in crime, in violence and so on and the president's very concerned about those issues as well from many statements that he's made.



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