



COMMUN VIII
UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY (UNGA)

MELANESIAN SEPARATISM

Background Guide

Authored by Aritra Ghosh '25

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to COMMUN VIII. My name is Aritra Ghosh, and I am a sophomore at Commonwealth. I have participated in Model UN regularly since my freshman year; both a delegate and as a staffer for COMMUN VII. This year is my first time chairing, so I look forward to learning as well as teaching throughout the conference.

In this committee we will be discussing the abundance of separatist movements throughout Melanesia as a result of post-colonial borders. Melanesia is a region in the Pacific consisting of New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Nauru, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji. The term is an inherently foreign concept created by European sailors to refer to the various peoples living in the aforementioned islands. This cultural generalization became political as a result of decolonization efforts: when western powers defined the borders of newly created states such as Papua New Guinea, they did so primarily based on existing imperial borders. Those borders, however, ignored pre-colonial cultural boundaries and combined regions with distinct cultural backgrounds. In many cases, newly created states were conglomerates of distinct cultures, most of whom feel little to no connection with each other. As citizens increasingly identify with ethnic rather than national identities, these cultural divisions threaten the stability of Melanesian states. Even given the role the United States played in the creation of this issue, Pacific politics remain underrepresented in American media. I hope this committee will allow you to learn more about this fascinating part of the world, and that you have a great time at the conference!

Position papers are an important aspect of preparing to represent your assigned country. To be eligible for awards, please email your papers to aghosh@commschool.org by the day before the conference, and feel free to reach out to me with any questions.

Aritra Ghosh, Commonwealth '25

BACKGROUND

Introduction:

This committee has convened to address two topics: the Indonesian occupation of **West Papua**, and the political status of **Bougainville Island**. Before delving into either case, it is necessary to observe some important parallels. In both cases, the territories were annexed into a larger state against the popular support of their inhabitants, and have intermittently resisted foreign governance since that time. Both territories had rigged or ineffective **independence referenda**, with state censorship of the media to prevent mass protest. A final key similarity is the immense mineral resources found within these territories. Mining contracts provide a massive source of revenue for the government that controls the territory, and these economic incentives make peaceful resolution of boundary or independence disputes extraordinarily difficult. No state or independence group is willing to renounce their claim to the area's vast mineral wealth, and this bloody gridlock necessitates UN action. Lasting solutions to either conflict should address these commonalities while considering the unique history of each conflict as described below.

History of West Papua:

The island of **New Guinea** had been inhabited by humans for millennia before their first contact with European explorers. Modern DNA analysis theorizes a split from neighboring populations around 50,000 years ago, around the same time as Australian Aboriginals. The archaeological record before European arrival is limited as a result of the island's tropical climate decomposing most materials, but it is clear that the eastern half of the island was more densely

populated than the west. Striking natural barriers such as the **Bismarck Range** isolated indigenous tribes, leading to the vastly different traditions and the hundreds of languages that are found on the island.

Unfortunately, this unique geography has proved less of a blessing than a curse. Tribal divisions combined with mineral wealth led to constant warfare over resources, a trend that continues into the present day. Investment by international mining conglomerates has brought some aspects of **globalization**, but development remains limited to certain communities. Moreover, the shift to outsourcing resource utilization to foreign firms in exchange for monetary contracts has highlighted and codified exactly who is benefitting from the natural resources of any given territory. Funds obtained from such contracts are typically received by the state rather than the local community, and separatists particularly object to the allocation of said resources to other parts of the nation.

Foreign contact was originally limited to the coast, with first Malay and Indonesian then Spanish and Portuguese traders referring to the island. The term “New Guinea” originated from explorer Iñigo Ortiz de Retez, who is said to have named it after noting the resemblance of the natives to inhabitants of Guinea in Africa. Following this point, there was scarce European interest in the island until the Dutch annexation of the **Sultanate of Tidore**, which held land in Western New Guinea. To expand the **Dutch East Indies**, the Netherlands claimed the western half of the island, and continued to invest colonial resources until the mid-20th century.

After the Indonesian War of Independence in 1949, the rest of the Dutch East Indies became territories of the Republic of **Indonesia** while West Papua remained under Dutch control. This was due to Dutch insistence that native Papuans were culturally distinct from Indonesians, and should be considered Melanesian rather than Southeast Asian. Still, with the

Indonesian government claiming a right to all former territories of the Dutch East Indies, retaining the colony became increasingly unfeasible. In 1962, the Netherlands relinquished their colony to Indonesia under the “New York Agreement,” but demanded that a referendum be held to determine the territory’s future. This referendum, held in 1969 and known as the “**Act of Free Choice**,” was heavily manipulated by the Indonesian military in favor of integration with Indonesia. Neither the **USA** nor the **USSR** contested this referendum, as neither nation wanted Indonesia to turn to the opposing bloc during the **Cold War**. As a result, the world stood by while Papuans were silently occupied by Indonesian forces.

In 1963, an organization known as the **OPM** (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, or the Free Papua Movement) was founded as an independence movement against Indonesian annexation. After drafting a Papuan constitution they led a constant guerilla war against Indonesian security forces. Several bloody skirmishes between Indonesian and OPM forces have led to a significant military presence in the region, and Indonesian soldiers have been accused of human rights violations against Papuan civilians. It is estimated that about 500,000 Papuans have died at the hands of Indonesian forces since 1963, and there is every indication that this trend will continue in the absence of effective international mediation.

In addition to military conflict, foreign immigration is also reshaping the region. Due to an influx of migrants, almost half the population is now of Indonesian or other ethnicities. Additionally, these migrants tend to inhabit the most developed cities as they work to extract the resources of the island. Still, modernization has reached inland through foreign mining companies. By setting up their operations in tribally-dominated regions, globalization has found its way into the very heart of the island. This has resulted in increased human development and regular jobs for Papuans, as well as access to modern amenities. At the same time though, it may

lead to future exploitation of indigenous peoples for cheap labor, and it has caused heavy pollution as a result of the toxic mining waste entering landfills and then rivers. If West Papua is to prosper, a balance must be struck between preserving Melanesian culture and reaping the benefits of modern development. Finally, there have been moments in the history of West Papua where a union with **Papua New Guinea** has been proposed, but little progress has been made on that front for decades.

Questions to Consider

- What gives a person, or a group of people, the right to land? To resources?
- What are the interests of Papuan citizens, and should distinctions between 'native' citizens and new migrants be considered?
- How should the OPM be categorized? As terrorists? As freedom fighters?
- What is at stake for Indonesian settler populations who have always lived in West Papua?
- What economic considerations are at stake, and how might resources be best leveraged to support sustainable development of local economies? Moreover, which communities and economies should benefit from mining income?
- What considerations should be in place for tribes who wish to live traditionally and merely to retain their access to traditional lands?
- As resource extraction degrades not only the land that is mined by also the surrounding area, how might environmental concerns be taken into consideration? Are those concerns any more poignant coming from traditionalists or opponents of globalization and mining?
- If a new state is to be created, what would its relationship with Papua New Guinea be? What might its relationship with Indonesia be like?

- How would any new state be governed, and who would enforce that order?

History of Bougainville Island:

Bougainville Island has undergone a bloody modern history, but today is on the verge of emerging as the world's newest democracy. When first recorded on European maps, the island was named for Louis Antoine de Bougainville, a famous French explorer who visited and named it in 1768. The island's natives are ethnically descended from Papuans who have lived there for over 20,000 years, but a substantial Austronesian presence arrived about 3,000 years ago. At this point, Austronesian settlers are believed to have set out from Taiwan towards the south Pacific, settling a vast swathe of islands from **New Guinea** to **Hawaii**. These settlers frequently mixed with the natives, and the low population of Bougainville made this effect more pronounced than in New Guinea. The island is believed to have lacked written history until contact with European sailors passing through the area, and the **Solomon Island chain**—of which Bougainville is the largest—was soon conquered by European colonial forces.

Bougainville Island was politically divided between German and British interests until its 1899 cession to the German Empire. Bougainville then became a part of **the Protectorate of New Guinea**, a vast territory under German protection incorporating the northeast of New Guinea alongside several surrounding islands. While German rule initially brought little change to the islanders' lives, the establishment of the **port of Kieta** in 1909 brought foreign investment and Christianity to the island. German rule was disrupted during the First World War as Bougainville was occupied by Australian expeditionary forces on the Pacific front. With the partition of German colonies in the **Treaty of Versailles**, Australia was given the mandate to

govern German New Guinea, and thus Bougainville came under Australian rule instead of reverting to the British Solomon Islands. During the second world war the island was occupied by Japan before being liberated to its prewar state by the allies, and until 1960 the Island remained relatively stable as a part of the Papua New Guinean territory Australia oversaw.

In 1960, Copper was discovered on the island. Following the initial discovery, further surveys would reveal that the island hid vast deposits of copper. The **Panguna** mine, established in 1972, was located around a particularly dense concentration of ore. The colossal **Rio Tinto Mining Group**, through its subsidiary **Bougainville Copper Ltd**, turned their operation into one of the world's largest copper mines at the time, earning immense profits. Taxes on **Panguna** were the largest source of revenue for what is now Papua New Guinea, especially in the first years after the nation's independence from Australia in 1975. This economic dependence created heavy government incentives to its continued operation. At the same time, the benefits from mining operations were scarcely felt by native Bougainvilleans. Local communities received a miniscule share of the mine's proceeds, and were segregated from foreign workers in business. In addition to poor treatment, pollution from mining devastated the island's ecosystem and threatened the health of ordinary Bougainvilleans. At this point, the population of Bougainville felt very separate from a Papuan identity in 1975. An attempt to form a Bougainvillean "Republic of North Solomons," failed when it did not receive international recognition or support. Unable to act independently, Papuan rule was accepted the next year, but Bougainvilleans still sought independence or at least autonomy within the nation.

This change in government from Australia to Papua New Guinea did not harm operations in Panguna at all. In fact, the new government was if anything more incentivized to ramp up production at the facility. With increased production came increased pollution, and with

increasing pollution of the environment ecological conditions on the island were further imperiled. Some years later in 1988, said pollution was believed to have driven the flying fox to extinction in Bougainville. In response, a group of landowners seized control of the mine and halted production entirely. This group, known as the **Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA)**, was opposed by **the Papuan New Guinea Defense Force**, resulting in an armed conflict. A year of bloody warfare followed, in which government forces burned a few villages that supported the **BRA** before withdrawing from the island. At this point a provisional Bougainvillean government was proclaimed, but did not receive international recognition. The Papua New Guinean government then declared a blockade around the island, completely cutting off exports and decimating its economy. Eight years of skirmishes later, peace talks were held in New Zealand and a year-long **ceasefire** was agreed upon. The truce was obeyed, and in 1998, **the Lincoln Agreement** was signed, ending the ten-year civil war. A second peace agreement in 2001 led to the establishment of an autonomous government in Bougainville, agreeing that a referendum for independence would be held at a then-undecided date within the next 20 years. This referendum was held in 2019, and an overwhelming 98% of voters opted for complete independence from Papua New Guinea. While the Papua New Guinean parliament is opposed to the island's secession, the Prime Minister has maintained cordial relations with Bougainville, and promises a peaceful transition to independence.

However high the hopes of Bougainvilleans may be, the question remains whether Bougainville is prepared for self rule. One important aspect of preparedness is economic development, and despite a high GDP per capita compared to other Papua New Guinean territories, Bougainville remains largely impoverished and dependent on international aid. A generation of young workers have been unable to find stable jobs due to the wartime devastation

of Bougainville, and employment for this “lost generation” is necessary to ensure the livelihood of an independent Bougainville.

Reopening the still-unoperational **Panguna mine** would be a clear source of employment and revenue but this venture runs a considerable risk of reigniting the factors that led to civil war in the first place. **Fishing** is another potential industry Bougainville could find a niche in, especially due to its prime position in sea cucumber trade. Beche-de-mer, or sea cucumbers, are a fascinating animal popular in East and Southeast Asian cuisine and are in high demand. The fishing of sea cucumbers is a traditional Melanesian activity, and the island would greatly benefit from the growth of such an industry. Beyond economic self-sufficiency, the lack of free media in Bougainville also presents a significant issue for coordination during a peaceful transition. Radio, television, and computer access on the island is scarce, and only found to a limited extent in the most populous regions. A strong infrastructure of information is necessary for self rule, allowing for UN volunteers and local authorities to ensure communities across the island are receiving basic human rights. One final issue is the possibility of opportunism by foreign powers to secure a foothold in the island as opposed to relinquishing the benefits of trade. On one hand, modernization in the country is likely to be predicated on international support and the growth of non-subsistence industry. Such an effort would be difficult or impossible without taking advantage of natural resources and opportunities on the island. At the same time, opening the island to potentially exploitative mining practices or other forms of economic exploitation brings its own risks. In a delicate time for this territory-turned-nation, the transition to independence must be made with caution so that a future for Bougainvilleans may be guaranteed.

ROLES

Delegate List:

Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Australia, New Zealand, United States, France, China, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Nauru, Netherlands, Germany, United Kingdom, Russia, Canada, Brazil, Fiji, Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Italy, Spain, Vietnam, India, Egypt.

Indonesia

A republic based on fragile foundations, Indonesia is at the forefront of the first topic in the committee, and must ensure its own safety by retaining control of West Papua. Incorporating several culturally distinct islands, the Indonesian government is constantly faced with the threat of separatism from all corners, necessitating a constantly active military. The loss of Lusophone Timor-Leste (East Timor) in 2002 by UN mandate set a dangerous precedent to these separatist regions, and the loss of West Papua would be a disaster to internal stability. Alongside the large Indonesian population in West Papua, these two issues provide critical leverage to preserve the territory. Steps must also be taken so that Bougainvillean independence does not encourage rebel elements.

Papua New Guinea

Having promised a peaceful transition to Bougainville, Papua New Guinea must ensure that it preserves its reputation on the international stage. While the economic importance of Bougainville has been lost through cessation of mining, and the civil war has ended peacefully, the Papuan government possesses another important duty. In order to ensure their goodwill, the

government must allocate resources to the island, currently an autonomous territory, so as to prepare its inhabitants for self-governance. This must be done through a notoriously corrupt bureaucracy, adding an additional layer to difficulty in assigning a sufficient budget to maintain good relations with the nation's Pacific neighbors. Failure in proper aid could result in a negative reputation lasting well into the future.

Australia

Master of the south Pacific, Australia is in a prime position to take advantage of both the committee's topics. Concerning West Papua, there are two possible courses of action. Firstly, supporting neighboring Indonesia in retaining West Papua would surely lead to closer diplomatic ties between both nations, allowing Australia favorable access into the vast Indonesian market. On the other hand, supporting West Papuan independence would help improve Australia's international image, but also allow it to control the new government through engaging in diplomacy before any other power due to geographic proximity. This is a possibility also present in Bougainville, and with Australia providing the most aid to the island out of any nation, it would not be difficult to expand its sphere of influence.

New Zealand

Having played a major part in allowing for Bougainvillean independence, New Zealand possesses a prestigious reputation as a peacemaker. It was diplomats from New Zealand who offered to host peace talks between both sides in the Bougainville Civil War, allowing for the bloodiest Oceanian conflict since the Second World War to come to an end in a stable manner. This act helped confirm New Zealand's intended appearance as friend to all Pacific nations,

allowing an important role in the committee. In the Bougainvillean situation, it would be best for the nation to make full use of its preexisting influence to push through a definitive resolution. Alongside this, the nation's neutral role in the West Papuan conflict allow for it to take a path of its choosing.

United States

Possessing a constant presence in the Pacific ever since the acquisition of California, the United States has a vested interest in the ensuing events. West Papua already possesses great economic significance to the nation, due to the ownership of Grasberg mine by American mining company Freeport McMoRan. Generating enormous profits, the mine brings wealth to both the United States and Indonesia, and it is critical that business continues unimpeded by political change, necessitating that stability be maintained. With Bougainville, a key goal of the United States would be to prevent further Chinese encroachment in the Pacific, through whatever means necessary.

France

Diplomatically, France is particularly close to Indonesia, especially in the military sector. Indonesia is a large buyer of equipment from French military firms, and regularly participates in joint training exercises in the Pacific. A recent \$8.1 billion deal signed for several Rafale jets has further deepened cooperation between these countries, and brought with it promises of cooperation in submarine and telecommunication research. In order to promote future business, maintaining the status quo could allow for future deals such as this recent one. Supporting the

development of Bougainville, however, has no such contradictions, and could allow for the French image as bringers of liberty to be maintained.

China

Seeking to expand its diplomacy beyond traditional geographic limits, China is seeking partnerships in all parts of the world, especially in the Pacific. Already actively promoting regional influence among nations such as the Solomon Islands, the appearance of a transitional region such as Bougainville in need of external aid is a prime opportunity. By fully supporting Bougainvillean development, China could gain the unique opportunity of completely remaking a sovereign nation into an ideal strategic ally in the Pacific. Additionally, the Chinese government has refrained from announcing any binding stance on the West Papuan situation, allowing for a completely pragmatic approach to a resolution.

Melanesian States:

Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Nauru

These four nations possess close solidarity with both relevant territories, each being fellow Melanesian states and having gone through the process of decolonization. Politically, the independence of West Papua and Bougainville could be considered as an extension of this process of decolonization, and this view has been reaffirmed by these nations in summits of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and independent declarations in favor of either region. With their cultural background, these nations may bring to the committee an idea of the hardships of Melanesian peoples, so that beneficial change may come to the region. For these nations,

furthering decolonization in the Pacific is their most significant priority, and there may be little compromise besides.

Western Aligned Nations:

Netherlands, Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, Spain

Even though these nations do not have direct territorial stakes in Bougainville or West Papua, they are still vital players in these increasingly globalized Pacific conflicts. Some of these nations: the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, continue to possess overseas territories, and all have been colonial powers with foreign holdings in the past. Today, while these nations support human rights and self-determination, their top priority is stability in the region and around the globe. With histories of decolonization to learn from and powerful economies to invest with, these nations have much to bring to the table.

Pacific Nations:

Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam

For these Pacific nations, West Papua and Bougainville are as much about the conflicts themselves as they are proxies for interests in the region. Actions taken by these countries will reflect long-term geopolitical strategy, and the potential for a more American or Chinese aligned Pacific. While they promote stability in the region, they may also be open to change, so long as it doesn't harm them.

Large Developing Nations:

India, Egypt, Brazil, Mexico

Formerly colonized and still developing, these countries are in a unique position, with vast capital and populations, but still limited economies on the global stage. Delegates from these countries should look to both how they can help in the region and how the region can help them. Even if they don't have direct interests in the area, these countries can still provide powerful examples of the struggles and successes of their development, and help guide West Papua and Bougainville in the right direction.

RESEARCH RESOURCES

Useful References

Articles on West Papua:

<https://www.asia-pacific-solidarity.net/west-papua>

News on Bougainvillean politics:

<https://bougainvillenews.com/>

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