

PAPUA NEW GUINEA: DISPLACED PERSONS

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Despite hazardous security and challenging logistics, the second phase of the Federation/PNGRCS relief operation, covering the west coast of Bougainville, was successfully completed in the volatile climate created by the run up to general elections . More than 6,000 families received a relief parcel. Final arrangements are being made for the next phase, moved forward to mid-July.

The context

Elections, possibly the most important in the short independent history of Papua New Guinea (PNG), started on 14 June. The final results will not be known, or a new government formed, before July. Violence, a common characteristic in PNG politics, occurred around the country but was considered minimal by previous standards, particularly in the traditional trouble spots of Port Moresby and the Highlands. On Bougainville, despite increasing tensions fuelled by the BRA threat to disrupt the elections, Phase II of the Federation/ PNGRCS Relief Operation was successfully carried out.

Latest events

Sir Julius Chan, who stepped aside as Prime Minister during the mercenaries crisis in March, returned to office claiming he had been exonerated by the official enquiry. As the elections drew closer there were reports of numerous armed clashes around the country. On Bougainville, there were several fatal confrontations between the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA), the PNG Defence Forces (PNGDF) and the local population. The most significant incident, the kidnapping by the BRA of Father John Moumis, a veteran Bougainvillian MP and several times a Cabinet Minister, seems to have had a positive outcome. On his release on 18 June Moumis stated that his experience had allowed a much needed direct dialogue with Francis Ona, the BRA/BIG president and Commander, and feelings are that this may have opened the door for new initiatives and given a boost to efforts to hold a peace meeting in New Zealand.

After a careful evaluation of the conditions on Bougainville and mindful that a delay would mean disappointment and even anger in the targeted Bana region, the delegation and the PNGRCS took the decision to proceed with Phase II. This was completed just before the start of polling on 14 June when, in conformity with a previously reported decision, the operation was put on hold until after the election results are announced.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Phase II of the Plan of Action targeted the relatively thinly populated Bana Region along the west coast of Bougainville. Two beach landing sites (Torokina and Murau) were identified where relief supplies would be unloaded from a drop-bow ship for transport inland by road or bush trail for distribution at central points. Where possible trips by truck would be attempted into the BRA "Uncontrolled Areas" to ensure more remote villages were served. Visits to circulate registration forms, to select local co-ordinators who would arrange transport and volunteers and to update arrival times were carried out beforehand. In addition to an earlier meeting with the BRA commanders, the HoD met with the Forward Tactical Commander (FTC), Buka, to brief him on the upcoming distribution.

Relief Action •

Port Moresby/Lae: The day before its planned departure the ship hired to transport the relief goods was unable to obtain repair clearance from the Marine Inspector and a replacement vessel had to be chartered and loaded in Lae. The Relief Administrator sailed with it to Buka for security clearance.

Buka Island (FTC HQ): Despite prior briefings, and subsequent clearances given by the FTC, the ship was delayed and searched before continuing to Torokina. (See Security Section).

Torokina: The HoD had set up the beach landing site, distribution and transport systems at Torokina. When the ship arrived delegates, PNGRCS staff and local volunteers were able to rapidly complete all registered village distributions from the site in one day. The speedy and efficient completion was due in large part to the effective local co-ordination.

Marau Beach: The arrival at Marau Beach, the second unloading point, coincided with a deterioration in the weather and accompanying heavy seas. It became clear that a beach landing was impossible. After weighing several options it was decided to unload everything at sea on to 7m Banana Boats and run the goods ashore through the surf. Thanks to the daring and expertise of the local boatmen and the wholehearted assistance of the Marau villagers this was accomplished in 18 hours without the loss of a single pack, despite terrible conditions on the first day. The fuel drums were thrown overboard to float ashore with the tide, again with no loss. A base camp was set up with storage for the supplies. The next problem was the discovery that none of the promised transport was available. Word was sent out to all areas that villages must come down to Marau to pick up the relief parcels.

Over the next week momentum slowly built up, aided by the arrival of one old truck and three pickups. The transfer of goods to Care Centres and remoter villages was painstakingly slow. Only one trip per day was possible due to road conditions and every trip required repairs. Security conditions in the area deteriorated and the presence of armed resistance units along the bush trail had an intimidating effect on villages walking in from the BRA controlled areas. Nonetheless by 12 June, just before polling began, all registered village lists had been served. The remaining stock was transferred to Soevele to be kept for isolated villages and others who had missed the distributions, or as buffer stock.

Work and living conditions under makeshift tarpaulin shelters were difficult with limited fresh food, bad sanitation, health problems for both delegates and PNGRCS staff who suffered from malaria and sandfly fever as well as gastric problems.

Buin: Advice that the proposed Phase III (Sewai Region) landing site was even worse than Marau led to a decision to replace Sewai with Buin (Phase IV) and vice versa. A successful survey and assessment mission was carried out by the Relief Administrator. Meetings with the PNGDF, Local Administration, chiefs and elders allowed the registration forms to be distributed. A detailed survey of the Kangu Beach landing site was made by the team and, to avoid a repetition of problems, trial runs with existing transport were made along the Buin / Kangu and Buin /Tokina trails. Contact was established with the BRA. A meeting between BRA commanders and the Delegation/PNGRCS to finalise security and safe conduct for Phase III was scheduled for July.

Distribution Summary at 18th June 1997

	Families	Persons
February	155	324
March	1,499	6,822
April	4,268	21,904
May	315	1,551
June	4,690	20,663
Total	10,927	51,264

In addition to the relief packs, a total of 18 Medical Packs were distributed to Health Centres and Care Centre clinics.

Logistics: The only real shipping problem was the vulnerability of the cargo to bad weather and heavy seas when stored on deck. If possible, a "below -deck" ship will be chartered next time. Almost two entire palettes (100 plus packs) were damaged, meaning time had to be spent drying out and re-packing or distributing stock in bulk to schools and clinics.

Ground transport is a major problem. The few vehicles available are all old and in a poor state of repair, and there are no spare parts and little fuel. Fuel carried by the team was essential for trucks, boats and the helicopter. This will be taken into consideration for the next phase.

Thanks to efforts by the supplier the start of Phase III could be moved forward. The new distribution plan is as follows:

Phase III Telai (Buin) Region 15 July - 1 August
Phase IV Sewai Region 15 August - 31 August .

Security:

Port Moresby/PNG: Contrary to expectations the capital remained calm during elections and polling was completed without major incidents. The elections were still not over everywhere at the time of writing and a number of areas were experiencing tension and violence sparked by delays in counting and accusations of fraud and ballot tampering.

Bougainville: The BRA threat to disrupt the elections was carried out. The first half of June was quite difficult: it included an all day shoot out between the BRA and the PNGDF around the Red Cross base of Arawa. In general however, from the Red Cross action perspective, the meeting with senior BRA commanders last month appears to have paved the way for a relatively trouble free operation. Both at Marau and Arawa military action steered well clear of Red Cross locations.

In one incident in Torokina when a local BRA officer threatened to attack the Red Cross the HoD and the PNGRCS Field Officer had to travel into the uncontrolled area to meet with BRA leaders to clarify objectives and explain earlier agreements. The meeting defused the situation and also facilitated the free movement of villagers from high in the mountains and along the volcano ridge down to Torokina distribution points. Of greater concern are increasing ground-fire attacks on helicopters, although this fire is thought to come from "Rascal" gangs and not the BRA.

The worst security incident occurred at Buka. After being given permission to depart by the second in command of the FTC, the ship was ordered back as it was about to clear the channel and boarded by aggressive armed military units claiming to be Naval Intelligence Marines. They terrorised the crew, demanding to search the whole cargo. The Relief Administrator was finally able to meet with and persuade the C/O FTC to intervene and the vessel was allowed to proceed.

Telecommunications during this phase were excellent. The small Q-Mac HF backpack radios performed very well, maintaining contact between elements of the team as they moved about, as well as good reception with the PNGRCS in Port Moresby. The only drawback was the absence of direct contact with Geneva for nearly three weeks. The decision not to take the Satphone is being reviewed.

Outstanding needs

The advantages of a Banana Boat noted in the last Sitrep became even clearer this month. The British High Commission has pledged a 23 ft boat equipped with a 50 H.P outboard motor and six life vests. It will also provide the team with a small portable generator that can be transported by boat or helicopter to improve security lighting, power radios and telecom and other camp uses. The boat will be loaded onto the next charter ship and used in Phase III. After that it will transport the Red Cross team back to Arawa base.

A Finance/Administration/Development Support delegate will join the Delegation at the end of June in time for the next phase.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Government: Apart from the ongoing liaison with the PNGDF on Bougainville and the meeting with the new Commander, government contacts were not pursued during the elections. These will be resumed when a new government is in place with new officials who will need briefing on the work of the Red Cross. Low profile contacts are maintained with BRA leaders and sectoral commanders to ensure maximum transparency and safety on Bougainville, especially during distributions in rebel held areas.

Donor/Diplomatic: A meeting with senior officials of the Australian High Commission, AusAID, and Defence Liaison was planned for 27 June.

ICRC: On his return from Bougainville the HoD fully briefed his ICRC counterpart in Manila on the operation's progress and related matters.

PNGRCS: The HoD assisted the Secretary General in obtaining seed funding (from AusAID) to prepare a DPP Plan of Action reflecting the role assigned to the PNGRCS in

the Government's review of its disaster services. Both the PNG Government and the Australian High Commission have reacted positively to the document.

In addition to strong support from the Secretary General in Port Moresby during the distribution phase, the PNGRCS Field Officer and the two local staff demonstrated increased confidence and ability to carry out operational work independently.

Media: A low profile has been adopted to date but after two successful distributions, plus universal acceptance and approval from the island's population and officials on both sides the time now seems ripe to publicise the operation. The aim is not the traditional one of raising funds but rather to show the work being done and the use of funds in what will continue to be a logistically demanding and security sensitive operation.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The successful but demanding Phase II has been a learning experience, but also a demonstration that the Federation/PNGRCS operation is well conceived. It has been welcomed by the vast majority of the population who have expressed appreciation of the trouble and risk the Red Cross is taking to ensure that even the most remote areas benefit. Phases III and IV will be increasingly complex, particularly in the areas of logistics and security. However improved advance surveys and assessments and careful communication between the parties involved give hope that they will progress safely and effectively.

This operation is being acknowledged on all sides as significantly contributing in a neutral and independent way to an improved awareness of the opportunity for free movement, communication and dialogue, which may prove helpful for any peace initiatives following the elections.

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