

Meeting the Bougainville Militia

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General Chris Uma of the Mekamui defence force and his son. Credit: Damian Baker.

By Damian Baker:

After a somewhat tense introduction we finally got to meet and talk with the leader of the remnants of the Bougainville militia General Chris Uma.

Following the initial breaking of the ice, as General Uma seemed to realise we were there to tell his story, he relaxed and came across as likable, if slightly edgy man. He is well aware that only one side of the Bougainville story had been aired to any extent in the past, has fought two National Governments and a multinational corporation and has reason to be careful.

These guys are not for compromise, The Mekamui Defence Force has a definite no mine policy and they stated more than once that if need be, more blood would be spilled. I felt empathy for their cause but I worry where it might lead.

It's hard to justify war on any grounds but these people have fought so hard and lost so many people, I sense they mean what they say. I believe it is a genuine story but there are so many factors at play here.

One thing seemed certain, they did not seem to be in for a quick buck, I hoped the wool was not being pulled over our eyes in other ways. Guns are often used for coercion, but as I saw it the people we spoke to didn't seem to be being pushed.

A UN source I contacted, who agreed to speak on condition of anonymity, said he didn't believe standover tactics were being used as it was a movement that came from the people.



Mekamui fighter. Credit: Damian Baker.

I truly hoped so.

For what appeared to be the world's first environmental war, it was almost too good to be true.

Access to the Mine

After a bit of heavy questioning Chris Uma and his men seemed to trust our motives and I think he grew to like us. They gave us the paperwork necessary to pass the armed checkpoint, which is still in place and we were on our way into the disputed territory.

Driving into the mine you enter a surreal world suspended in time by the sudden destruction wrought by war. The massive skeletal remains of half demolished buildings and the rusting hulks of burnt mining machinery are strewn throughout the huge hole in the ground that is the Panguna mine.

The walls seep green copper residues and the waterways run blue green as a result. The tailings are so huge as to be unimaginable; the riverbed is now 30 metres deep in tailings and erosion and the valley floor once steep and jungle clad is now a desert landscape flat void of any vegetation.



Colonel Alex Dakamari, Mekamui defence force. Credit: Damian Baker.

I suddenly understood the meaning of environmental devastation.

While the damage from the mine can be blamed on the mining companies and a good portion of the 20,000 lives lost on the PNG Military, with help from the Australian army, it was also obvious that the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) had wrought a destruction of their own during the conflict.

The mining township of Arawa has been burnt to the ground and not much of it had been resurrected. War never really benefits anyone or anything and the damage still resonates.

As governments and mining companies talk of reconciliation and a possible reopening of the mine, it is obvious to me that the decommissioning of the militia's weapons and any agreement with the militia to allow the reopening of the mine is a long way from happening.