



- Why the Frieda River Mine should not go ahead and making the Sepik River Region a World Heritage Area
- COVID-19 in Papua New Guinea
- Farewell to Sir Michael Somare

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~ Emmanuel Peni of Project Sepik

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WHY THE FRIEDA RIVER MINE SHOULD NOT GO AHEAD AND MAKING THE SEPIK RIVER REGION A WORLD HERITAGE AREA

Issue 19 of the GJOP Pacific Bulletin, published in June 2020, included an article about the Frieda River Mine and the threat to the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea.

On 14 March 2021, Project Sepik, a not-for-profit organisation based in Papua New Guinea, and Jubilee Australia Research Centre released a new report on the dangers posed by the proposed Frieda River Mine to the Sepik River and urged its rejection by Papua New Guinean government authorities.

The report is titled *The Sukundimi Walks Before Me*, in reference to the river spirit that Sepik people believe dwells in and protects the river. The Sepik River is one of the most important river systems in Papua New Guinea and the Asia-Pacific Region, and its catchment area is home to 400,000 people.

The report outlines six key reasons why the Frieda River mine should not go ahead, including:

1. the irreplaceable environmental and cultural value of the region;
2. glaring inadequacies of the environmental impact statement (EIS);
3. the threat posed by a potential failure of the tailings dam;
4. the inappropriateness of the alternative to a tailings dam, Deep Sea Tailings Disposal;
5. the lack of consent of the Sepik communities;
6. the similarities between the Frieda River Mine and other environmental disasters in PNG, particularly the Ok Tedi mine and the Panguna mine.

PanAust, the Chinese-owned, Australian-registered company, submitted its EIS for the project to PNG's Conservation and Environmental Protection Authority (CEPA) in 2019. CEPA has to either reject or accept the EIS, which it has yet to do. If it accepts the EIS, it would then grant the Environmental Permit needed for the project to go ahead. Then PanAust would use the permit to get the Mineral Development Authority (MRA) to approve a mining license. The report urges CEPA to reject the EIS outright and for the MRA to refrain from approving a mining license for the project.

Emmanuel Peni, Coordinator of Project Sepik, said: 'This Project poses unacceptable risks to our ancestors, ourselves and the lives of our unborn children. It risks the spirit of all plants and animals of the river, the lakes, the tributaries and streams. The company does not have the consent of the Sepik people. I sat with company executives in Brisbane in 2019 and told them, on behalf of the tens of thousands of people who live along the river, that they do not have free, prior and informed consent for this mine.'

Dr Luke Fletcher, Executive Director of Jubilee Australia Research Centre, said: 'The Supreme Sukundimi Declaration last year showed that opposition to this mine is universal and widespread along the river: there is simply no way for this project ever to achieve free, prior and informed consent. Moreover, expert analysis detailed in our report has confirmed what the people already know: the mine will not be safe, cannot be safe. The enormous scale of the mine and tailings, in a mountainous area with high rainfall and high seismic activity, together mean that the mine poses unacceptable risks to the Sepik people and wildlife.'

Emmanuel Peni concluded: 'This must be a world river. This must be a World Heritage Area. We need to bring this message out to the world: That, this is not only Papua New Guinea's river and rainforests, but Papua New Guineans are custodians of something that must belong to the world.'

To add your voice to the campaign to protect the Sepik go to <https://savethesepik.org/take-action-4-sepik-river/>

Sources: 'The Sukundimi Walks Before Me: six reasons why the Frieda River mine must be rejected', 14 March 2021, Jubilee Australia Research and Prospect Sepik.

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COVID-19 IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

On 29 April Papua New Guinea (PNG) recorded 10,915 cases of COVID-19 and 107 deaths with the average number of new cases daily about 126. But according to a doctor in Enga province those figures do not indicate how fast the virus is spreading. Only 90,000 tests have been done on the population of 9 million people since the start of the pandemic, and in remote areas there is not

the means to do tests. The country has only 500 doctors and its health system is under severe strain. On 13 March 2020 PNG had its first COVID-19 case and the government declared a State of Emergency nine days later. And almost a year to the day on 22 March 2021 PNG entered into a month-long nationwide isolation with schools closed and only essential travel allowed. But despite the restrictions the number of COVID-19 cases continues to soar. According to aid organisation Medecins Sans Frontieres PNG hospitals and clinics are overwhelmed and many health workers have been infected. All 22 PNG provinces have recorded cases, but the majority have occurred in the National Capital District and in the Western Province overwhelming hospitals and health services.

In mid-March 2021, Amnesty International's Pacific Researcher, Kate Schuetze said: "Papua New Guinea's health crisis has now reached the level we feared it would a year ago with a surge in cases. A combination of an ailing health system and inadequate living conditions has created a perfect storm for COVID-19 to thrive in the country's overcrowded informal settlements."

The Australian Government has sent 8,000 vaccine doses to PNG which have been given to health workers. But because the vaccine doses must be stored at low temperatures, stable electricity is needed to power refrigerators to store the doses, and as only 13% of PNG's population of nine million [see GJOP Pacific Outlook Bulletin December 2020] have access to electricity it remains unknown how a nationwide vaccine roll-out can happen.

PNG recently received 132,000 more AstraZeneca vaccine doses from COVAX, a global initiative aimed at equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines, made in India, and Australia is now sending 10,000 AstraZeneca vaccine doses every week to Pacific Island nations including PNG. With Australia's decision to give its population under the age of 50 the Pfizer vaccine, rather than the AstraZeneca one, due to the occurrence of blood clotting in a small number of cases, the PNG health authorities momentarily halted the roll out of the AstraZeneca, but with the belief that the benefit far outweighs the risk, are now administering it again. However, with its young population, the average age being 22, many people in PNG want more evidence that the AstraZeneca vaccine is safe.

According to an article by Marian Faa, Evan Wasuka and Lice Movono for ABC's Pacific Beat, Dr Khai Huang, an infectious diseases expert at the Burnet Institute in Australia, believes that sending AstraZeneca vaccines to PNG, while limiting their use in Australia, could be seen as a "double standard". But he supports PNG's decision to continue administering the vaccine to under 50-year-olds, because he believes more people are likely to die from COVID-19 than from complications from the vaccine. According to the World Health Organisation only between 11 and 29 people out of the 8 million populations might develop the rare blood clots caused by the vaccine.

But, despite the advice of medical experts, because most Papua New Guineans get their information from Facebook, much of which is incorrect – there are instances of conspiracy theories and fake news, many are not keen to have the vaccine, fearing side effects. "Misinformation within the community and online about the illness is also rife, with some suggesting the illness is a government conspiracy theory," says Kate Schuetze. "This has also been fuelled by the government at times publishing inaccurate information on the number of confirmed cases."

Kate Schuetze firmly believes that Australia and New Zealand, together with other key donors, need to urgently step up and provide the assistance their neighbour needs.

"Both countries continue to fail to support calls by around 100 countries, mainly in the global south, for a temporary waiver of intellectual property rights that would enable increased production, affordability and accessibility of vaccines."

However, Beta Seta, who managed the community services projects of the Uniting Church of PNG says the race to vaccinate people in the country faces severe challenges.

“In the Highlands there are strong beliefs about witchcraft and people have traditionally used poisoned arrows and foods against others, so people are very suspicious of anything that is injected into the body.” Seta says that the Uniting Church has joined with other churches and are talking with people about their fears and reassuring them that the vaccine is safe. “We did the same with polio and measles vaccinations, and we had good success.” But she knows that quick and immediate action is needed.

“To be honest we are very fearful – we have seen what can happen in even affluent countries with this disease. If this really spreads to rural areas, where there is not much access to clean water or health workers, things will be very difficult.”

Sources: Papua New Guinea: Australia and New Zealand efforts ‘woefully inadequate’ amid COVID-19 surge, 17 March 2021, Amnesty International; PNG facing AstraZeneca vaccine hesitancy as some locals refuse to take jab amid rollout by Marian Faa, Evan Wasuka and Lice Movono, 13 April 2021, ABC’s Pacific Beat; Time is running out to prevent catastrophe in PNG, 17 March 2021 by Uniting World Church Partnership Program (PNG) News and “‘We don’t have any grasp’: Covid-19 crisis pushes PNG hospitals to the brink’ by Jamie Tahana, RNZ Pacific.

FAREWELL TO SIR MICHAEL SOMARE

Known by many as the ‘father of the nation’ Sir Michael Somare led Papua New Guinea to independence in 1975 as the country’s first Prime Minister. His political career spanned from 1968 to 2017 and he was the country’s longest-serving Prime Minister, having held the position for 17 years over separate terms. He died of pancreatic cancer on 26 February 2021 aged 84. Lady Veronica Somare and he married in 1965, and they have five children.

He was born in Rabaul, the eldest son of a policeman, but grew up in his family village of Karau in the East Sepik Province, and maintained his strong links with the Sepik area throughout his life. He was a teacher and a radio journalist before entering politics in 1968. He trod a path of radical opposition to the racist nature of Australian colonial rule, alongside a more moderate role in which he was a member of the Constitutional Planning Committee preparing for independence. He was a builder of consensus and generally aimed to avoid conflict. He led the 800 different language and tribal groups of Papua New Guinea and united them as one nation.

But his five decades in politics were at times controversial. He was unseated as Prime Minister in 2011, because of being out of the country for several months due to heart surgery complications, and the Prime Minister’s seat was declared vacant. Four months later the PNG Supreme Court declared the election of his opponent, Peter O’Neill, was unconstitutional, but the two men both claimed to be the legitimate prime minister.

He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1990 and also holds the official PNG title of Grand Chief. When he retired from politics he said:

“I gave my best years in this country, I served as a politician. I hope you will each find the grace to continue our dream of our great nation, Papua New Guinea.”

Sources: ‘Sir Michael Somare, first prime minister of Papua New Guinea, dies at age of 84’ by Bethanie Harriman and Belinda Kora, 26 February 2021, ABC News; ‘Timeline of key events: Papua New Guinea’s road to independence’ by Andie Noonan, 23 February 2018, ABC News.

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