



The cover of the May 1997 edition of *Pacific Islands Monthly*. From left: Prime Minister Chan, Major Enuma and Brigadier Singirok. Design: RANUKU

'The world is watching us and we've got a message'

World coverage on the Sandline affair was in contrast to that on the long-running civil war on Bougainville. Foreign journalists have been kept out and perhaps it is just a coincidence that its horrors have never been live on CNN but now peace is close for its hard-pressed people.



By MICHAEL FIELD

WHEN Australian gold prospectors plunged into Papua New Guinea's Highlands in the 1930s they filmed people who had never before seen white men. The footage, bundled into a movie called *First Contact*, is reckoned to be the only movie shot during the times of colonial power of the moments of contact between Europeans and indigenous people. Throughout Papua New Guinea's current troubles it has been screening on pay-TV in the country, a reminder of the unequal relationship between the coloniser and the colonised.

When Papua New Guinea's military staged a revolt in March and sent Port Moresby into 10 days of tension the event was almost exclusively defined by the sons and daughters of the colonisers, Australians. The New Zealand media was absent.

After an incredibly tense Wednesday, March 26, in a besieged Parliament Haus, Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan 'stepped aside'. He is a small, philosophical character, although with his feet sufficiently on the ground to have become a very wealthy businessman. After his decision was taken he met the world and local press in a crowded cabinet room.

Among the media, trying to work out what had happened and whether we'd just seen a coup, was Ratih Hardjono from Jakarta's *KOMPAS* daily. Ten years ago she had achieved something of a scoop with an interview with Fiji's Sitiveni Rabuka just after he came to power. She had done it by cornering him at a round of golf.

On that office wall was a picture of Chan passing a spear to Rabuka who on

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May 14 will mark the anniversary of his first coup. Faced with a wall of cameras and reporters Chan expressed amazement: 'This is probably the first time in the history of this nation that we have been totally exposed to the modern transparency.'

Unknowns became famous, including PNG Defence Force commander Jerry Singirok, a Rabuka lookalike. Also world famous was an unknown soldier in a pink shirt who lost his cool and was photographed and filmed with a pistol at the head of an officer and hitting another officer.

Thanks to the excellent *Post-Courier* he was revealed to have been Corporal 'Terminator' Allan. He was central to the events around Parliament, supporting Major Walter Enuma who was commander of 'Operation Rausim Kwik', the military code term for getting the MPs to sack Chan.

The world media focused on Singirok and Enuma but in Africa, where this kind of behaviour used to be endemic, its corporals with 11 years of service, like Allan, who are the worry. He told the *Post-Courier* he was Enuma's right-hand man.

'With that influence, I contained all the soldiers,' Allan said. 'The top hierarchy had no option but to come down to me. We are the backbone of the army.'

On the barricades outside Parliament media attention became heady stuff for people like Melanesian Solidarity (Melsol) speaker Jonathan Oata. While the loudspeakers carried the parliamentary debate to the crowd, Oata and others frequently cut it off to make their own points in Tokpisin. When he spoke in English, television crews would film him.

'The world is watching us,' he told the crowd, 'and we want to send a message to Australia and (Prime Minister John) Howard.'

Papua New Guinea has been independent since 1975, but Australia matters still and Oata claimed Australian forces were coming to rescue the 10,000 Australian nationals in the country. Such a move, he said, was a threat to sovereignty.

Looking at the media, he said: 'You cannot evacuate 10,000 people in two hours.'

Another protest leader, Peti Lafanama [later elected Governor of East Highlands in the June general election], called in cameras to deliver what he said was 'our message to the world'.

The CNN effect was very strong — although paradoxically CNN was not there. But the effect is that if it is being filmed, it matters. Thus, as night fell outside the gates, the crowd and the rebel soldiers settled in for a determined, but quiet night. But then TV cameras would turn their lights on and suddenly the mood would go ugly and people, passive just moments before, would be trying

'THE WORLD IS WATCHING'

to climb fences for the world media. Protest organisers were embarrassed by the way the media had filmed riots early in the week. Apart from anything else, it was quickly apparent that the riots had never been political; they had been opportunistic and largely criminal. Throughout the siege of Parliament organisers pleaded with protesters not to riot again and give media the chance to film an ugly side of Papua New Guinea.

National Capital District Governor Bill Skate, who moved the motion to get rid of Chan, spoke from behind the high fence to protesters and in his speech made an appeal to the media: 'Please give us good coverage — we have a future and we need assistance.'

At one point soldiers handed out biscuits to people and a fight broke out. Photographers ran to capture the scene but as they did the protesters, almost as one, turned on the photographers — throwing rocks at them.

Several Australian television outlets began reporting that Chan had fled the country. He had not and the story made it tense and difficult for reporters covering the story as it seemed to irritate all sides.

Local journalists wore the brunt of the anger. Some were stoned, many were abused. Singirok's wife Winnie is a journalist working for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and like her local colleagues ended up taking the greater risks in covering the story.

At one of the numerous PNGDF searches one had to endure, an army captain, on learning I was a journalist, neatly summed it up: 'Be delicate, the people don't like you much now.'

Except they thought I was an Australian, and from a New Zealand perspective it was also odd that one of the biggest regional news events saw no representation from this country — other than a brief riot appearance of television New Zealand. Radio New Zealand joined the queue of world radio stations phoning the press gallery and interviewing whoever answered (the BBC and the ABC were there).

Dozens of Australian journalists were on the scene and even two of the three international news agencies, Reuters and Associated Press, were represented by Australians. (Agence France-Presse had a Scot and myself).

Australians did a very good job in Papua New Guinea — but it was for an Australian audience deeply interested in their former colony and the strategic implications of what was happening. Chan knew this and admitted the Sandline mercenary affair had caused great damage to PNG-Australian relations. Chan said:

'It seemed to have come into conflict with the Australian defence and international policy in this region. It has created a tremendous amount of tension I never envisaged ... The sources and the forces and the institutions came, almost

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in an onslaught, on Papua New Guinea, unimagined, unanticipated.'

New Zealand may have had a viewpoint on the ground, but nobody was there asking for it. As something of a veteran in the Pacific, I have come to realise that Australians and New Zealanders see the region very differently. It seems to me that if we as a nation are to matter in our region, our reporters have to be there.

Still, the world coverage is in contrast to that on the long-running civil war on Bougainville. Foreign journalists are kept out and perhaps it is just a coincidence that its horrors have never been live on CNN and no super power diplomatic initiatives have ever been launched to bring peace to its hard-pressed people.

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□ Michael J. Field is the New Zealand-based South Pacific correspondent for Agence France-Presse and covered the Sandline mercenary crisis in March 1997. This article was originally published in the Wellington Evening Post in April 1997. By the time PJR went to press in November, Major Enuma and his colleagues had been tried in a court-martial and truce monitors had arrived in Bougainville after the Burnham Declaration for peace.

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Singirok claims denied

Claims by sacked PNG military commander Jerry Singirok before the first mercenary Commission of Inquiry that Sandline planned to hire a journalist for A\$250,000 to 'positively report on Sandline' have been strongly denied by the two named journalists.

By PETER CRONAU

THE JOURNALIST named during the first Commission of Inquiry into the mercenary affair as the one who Sandline planned to hire for A\$250,000 to 'positively report on Sandline' has denied the claims. Michael Ashworth, a 29-year-old former British paratrooper and now freelance journalist, says while he is sympathetic towards Sandline's operations, the claim that he was a paid propagandist for them is incorrect.

The claims that Sandline had planned to hire an international journalist to 'positively report on Sandline to capture worldwide attention' were made on April 9 by sacked Defence Force Commander Brigadier-General Jerry Singirok and were published in *The National* the next day. *The National* misspelled the journalist's name as 'Mike Asward'.

'I was paid a quarter of a million dollars? Oh my God, that is absolute bullshit, absolute bullshit,' says Ashworth. 'It's absolutely scandalous.' He said he wrote three articles on the mercenaries while in PNG, but not for Sandline. He said he visited PNG on behalf of *The Independent* newspaper in London, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* to report on the mercenary operation, on the basis of his close contact with Sandline International head Tim Spicer.

'If anyone wants to call me up to find out how much I was paid, well I wasn't. I'm still trying to get paid, still trying to get payments from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, from South African newspapers, and I'm absolutely stone broke,' said Ashworth.

Last year, Ashworth reported for *The Independent* (UK) on the Sandline operations in Sierra Leone, a report he said Spicer liked. Ashworth admits to being fascinated by mercenaries, by the 'privatisation of violence, the privati-