

MICHAEL FIELD

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-

PETER CRONAU

sation of war'. Singirok also named another journalist in his evidence to the inquiry.

'In particular, he [Ashworth] was a house guest to Sean Dorney from ABC,' Singirok told the inquiry, according to *The National*. Sean Dorney, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's long-serving Port Moresby correspondent, denies the accusations of Singirok.

'To have Singirok come out and accuse me of harbouring a Sandline spy is an amusing twist on the fact that other people are accusing me of being the agent of the PNGDF,' said Dorney.

Dorney first met Ashworth one morning in a group of four journalists trying to fly to Wewak to see the mercenary training. After being refused access to Moem Barracks over several days, Ashworth told Dorney he had run short of money so Dorney said he offered Ashworth a room to stay for several nights.

'In terms of what Singirok was suggesting, that he was some highly paid infiltrator for the media, Mike was not the man. He knew very little about the media, and was seeking advice from me all the time as to what he should do,' said Dorney, who interviewed Ashworth for the ABC as an expert on Sandline and Executive Outcomes.

'Spicer told Singirok at one stage that they were going to spend \$240,000 on a media operation. Then all of a sudden this English journalist pops up who they knew nothing about, who came into the country with the help of Sandline, and he just assumed that this was the great media manipulator. But he never got to me, Ashworth,' said Dorney.

Dorney said the Agence France-Presse news agency also incorrectly reported that Sandline head Tim Spicer was staying in his house, although this was later retracted after Dorney complained.

Singirok declined to discuss the claim he made about Ashworth, but admitted he had no positive proof that Ashworth received a payment from Sandline.

'The information that I gave to the inquiry is still subjudice for the commission, and it would be totally unfair if I comment about the evidence that I've given,' he said. But he added Spicer was aware of the potential of a media leak and it was vital to get positive publicity - 'and you can understand why'.

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□ Peter Cronau, of Bushfire Media, is co-director of Pacific Media Watch and an Australian-based journalist specialising in Pacific affairs. The article was originally carried by PMW in April and this abridged version was published in the June issue of Media Nius. Email: bfmedia@peg.apc.org
Pacific Media Watch <http://www.pactok.net.au/docs/nius/>

Fri Pres: Media freedom in the Pacific

Assaults, arbitrary imprisonment, gaggings, threats, and defamation cases have become an increasing hazard for Pacific journalists. And they also face mounting pressure from governments to be accountable and to report the truth. But the issue is whose truth and accountability to whom?

By DAVID ROBIE

Title sequence: French riot police attack peaceful balloon-wielding protesters with in Noumea during 1987 as TV cameras capture the drama.

Cut to: Students are teargassed and a reporter is punched and booted by police on the Waigani campus of the University of Papua New Guinea in 1996.

Cut to talkback clip on Radio Kalang, 1993:

TIM NEVILLE: Their remarks to him were, or warnings, or threat, were that you better tell your minister, your brother, that he'd better back off on the forestry policy issues or you and your family are as good as dead.

ACROSS the South Pacific today, the news media are under siege as never before. In some countries journalists face brutal assaults, arbitrary imprisonment, gaggings, threats, defamation cases with the threat of bankruptcy and vilification. And they also face mounting pressure from governments to be accountable and to report the truth.

But the issue is whose truth and accountability to whom?

As Pacific journalists and news media become more professional and probing on the dilemmas of development, economic and social policy and issues such as corruption, there is a danger that some politicians want to restrict the media from meeting the public interest.

[Title frames run against cartoon images and Lucky Dube reggae theme music.]

Papua New Guinea is now facing pressure on the news media that is typical