

Post-Courier stays put

The PNG *Post-Courier* is one of the most influential and independent newspapers in the South Pacific. Rumours of its likely sale to business and political interests close to Prime Minister Bill Skate stirred a recent controversy.

By DAVID ROBIE

AFTER THREE WEEKS of persistent rumours, the South Pacific's biggest selling newspaper — and one of the most outspoken — finally brushed aside claims in December 1998 that it was up for sale. Community leaders and media personalities feared a major setback for press freedom in Papua New Guinea had the controlling interest in the *Post-Courier* been sold to a business and political consortium close to Prime Minister Bill Skate.

Peter Chegwyn, chairman of South Pacific Post Ltd, publishers of the *Post-Courier* and a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd group, strongly denied the rumours that the PNG Banking Corporation was considering buying out the 63 per cent News stake in the company. The bank's executive chairman, Peter O'Neill, also denied the rumours. O'Neill had recently resigned as president of Skate's fledgling PNG First Party but he was still closely aligned with the Skate administration.

Skate seeks a more compliant news media and was particularly angered by the *Post-Courier's* reporting of an alleged plea by military commander Brigadier-General Jerry Singirok to the Prime Minister to have sedition charges dropped against him over the Sandline rebellion. When Skate returned from a brief visit to China in December, he made it clear that he did not like "negative" reporting by the PNG press. He said the news media in China, Malaysia and Singapore were an example to PNG.

MEDIA BUY OUTS

“You in the media are very powerful, and you can build or destroy people by what you do,” he told journalists. Acknowledging that the media should be “independent and impartial”, he added: “I think there is something to learn from how these people promote their country and government.”

The minority shareholders outside the News Ltd and other Australian interests are individual Papua New Guineans, the Post Office Savings Bank, the Public Employees Association and the Defence Force Retirement Fund, which collectively hold about 29.34 per cent.

The *Post-Courier's* circulation reached a peak of 41,000 in 1994, but it dropped after a rival daily newspaper, the Malaysian-owned *National*, was launched. After the *Post-Courier* edged back again with steady circulation increases over the next three years, all PNG newspapers lost circulation heavily during 1998 in the face of an economic recession. The *Post-Courier* currently has audited sales of almost 28,000.

Asked about the sale rumours, Chegwyn said in an interview with the *Post-Courier's* Ruth Waram that the paper would continue to support the “constitutional rights of Papua New Guineans” and would fight to protect them. Denying that there was any substance to the rumours, he said:

The paper will continue to be published as it is today, to be managed by the people it is managed by today, and the editorial under Oseah Philemon will continue on. There are no plans for any changes in the culture of the *Post-Courier* ... I mean that the management, accounting, publishing, editorial, no changes whatsoever are contemplated.

Chegwyn said if any internal changes were planned in the company they would be handled by managing director Tony Yianni and by editor Oseah Philemon. He said the media had an important role to play in a developing country such as Papua New Guinea, and the *Post-Courier* would continue to play its role. Chegwyn said the paper would “be accountable to the people of Papua New Guinea first and foremost”.

“We unashamedly support the constitutional rights of Papua New Guineans and will fight to the last drop of ink to protect them,” he said. “We support good government by the people who place the national interest ahead of personal interests.”

Chegwyn added that investors currently needed certainty and confidence, and PNG also needed to improve on how it was perceived from the outside. He said many companies were now reviewing their operations in light of the current tough economic conditions, both locally and globally.

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Meanwhile, South Pacific Post Ltd was expected to put a bold five-year development plan to the News Ltd board early in 1999. The plan was expected to include proposals to move the printing headquarters of the *Post-Courier* to Lae and to launch a chain of community and provincial level newspapers.

Another newspaper group, the churches-owned Word Publishing Ltd, is also looking at printing in Lae to cut back on the heavy air freight costs from the capital of Port Moresby to the rest of the country.

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