

'Dear Mum and Dad'

'By sunrise, on this bloody Tuesday, June 26, Port Moresby came under siege. Four people, including two students from the University of PNG, had been shot dead. Their bodies were driven to the Port Moresby General Hospital morgue. Seventeen protesters with pellet wounds were admitted to the hospital's emergency ward.'

Quote from *Uni Tavur*

By ESTELLA CHEUNG

Dear Mum and Dad

I'VE GOT lots to tell you! Before I go on just one word of advice, "Don't believe everything you hear or read in the media" (that includes newspapers, radio and TV). I'm saying this because of the current situation here at UPNG, which you may have some idea about ... but I know that parents have it in their nature to be concerned about everything and anything under the sun that will affect their children. I bet you, that right now you have a thousand questions you are dying to ask.

Before I continue with what I want to say, I ask for your patience, time and understanding to read the truth about the whole situation because I want you to know the truth. I want you to draw your minds from being tossed about with endless questions and set the record straight. So please, bear with me.

On Saturday night (17 June 2001) my room mate and I were watching a movie on the big screen in the main lecture theatre. In the middle of this movie, the screen was shut off and the lights were turned on. The president of one of the Highlands provinces broke the news to those of us in the theatre that the following Friday (22 June 2000) PNGBC — our bank — was going to be sold out or privatised.

He explained how the land mobilisation programme would come into effect. From the brief lecture he gave us about the bad side of selling PNGBC,

UNI TAVUR TESTIMONY

I learnt that if ever land mobilisation was imposed, we would be forced to register our own land in order to live on it and toil it. I'm sure you've heard about the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Well, since independence, Papua New Guinea has been borrowing so much from the World Bank in order to "develop" the country. Unfortunately, I am sorry to say we never succeeded. The reason is because of the WANTOK SYSTEM from which CORRUPTION is bred. PNG's loans are so big, not even our resources can pay them all back — like the Ok Tedi mine, Lihir mine, West New Britain palm oil, Jant, etc. So the loans just keep on growing year after year.

The government came up with a solution, a solution that will solve our debt problem as a country but one that will affect us as individuals even more. And that is to sell PNGBC and have people register their land. If they don't, their land is taken away from them and given to the bank. The bank will then rent it out to larger companies. The profit will then go to the World Bank to repay our loans. The registering of land would depend on the size of person's land. If you have a big piece of land you pay more, if you have small piece — you pay less to get your land registered.

But the majority of our people are subsistence farmers and live in rural areas where the land is the source of their children's school fees, clothing etc. This will NOT be fair on them, because they have no chance at all of keeping their land. If they cannot pay the registration fee before the set date their land will be taken away. So they will have to work on someone else's land to feed their children, and pay for their family needs.

Anyway, after the movie ended, we had a long talk about it. The majority of the students wanted to do something about it because they come from the rural areas. I felt that it was my responsibility to take part because my future depended on the land at home, and the future of my family depended on me.

So I disobeyed you and Dad's advice to me at the beginning of my first year. (Not to take part in any protest or strike). I couldn't stand and watch, and the thought of leaving school with no job and no place to settle, ticked me off! Besides, it was for a good cause.

The next day, Monday, classes were cancelled, but some still attended classes. There was a forum, and in the forum the issue was addressed again. People, who knew more about the issue, tried to educate everyone on it.

On Tuesday, we had a referendum vote on whether to go to class and at the same time address the issue or whether to stop classes and concentrate on addressing the issue. The majority voted for no classes. We did everything

ESTELLA CHEUNG

legally. For the voting part, we had some people from the Electoral Commission of PNG come down and conduct the secret ballot — so the final result was recognised and respected by the administration.

The referendum covered until Friday, June 22, then the following week everyone was expected to return to classes. Under the bylaws of the university after 10 days of boycotting classes, the university will have to close for the rest of the academic year. So the Student Representative Council (SRC) told us that the referendum was only covering five days.

On Wednesday, we broke up into regional and provincial groups and we were given areas to do awareness campaigns for the public. The reason for this was to educate the public and at the same time get their support. We told them to meet in front of the Morauta Haus on Thursday morning and wait for the Prime Minister to come down and receive the petition, which was drawn up by the SRC. We covered the whole of the National Capital District. I was in the New Guinea Islands group. We covered the Gerehu area and downtown Port Moresby. By the time we finished, it was 5.30 pm. PMV drivers helped out with the transport by using their working time to drive us around to our located areas to protest. By the end of the day the whole of NCD was aware of what was happening. Our theme was non-violence, the Ghandi way. This was pointed out to the public and they were aware that we were going to address the issue using non-violence. The start of the protest was peaceful.

On Thursday morning, the NGI students made their way downtown to protest in front of PNGBC. We were yelling “rausim IMF, rausim World Bank” over and over. We got the attention of several PNGBC workers, who thought they’d support us a little from the top of the PNGBC building. It was interesting to see how much attention we got from the public. There were a few very thoughtful betel nut sellers, who bought us cold drinks, seeing we had been out in the sun for hours. Drivers tooted their horns to show their support as they drove pass, the public joined in with the yelling when we started losing our voices. For those of us who were engaged in a protest for the first time, it was fun. But for those who were in past protests, it was something serious and “fragile”. Other regional groups were doing the same at different areas.

At lunch time we headed back to Morauta Haus. By the time we got there, there was already a large crowd gathered. Approximately 20,000 men women and children. Talk about public support, we practically had the whole of NCD there! (Except for the working class, particularly the ones who are stuck in their offices all day).

UNI TAVUR TESTIMONY

Our student leaders sent word to the Prime Minister to come down and receive the petition. He sent other ministers instead. (A pretty cheap thing to do for someone of his rank). I'm not so sure who the ministers were, but boy did they have the time of their life! I mean they were shamed in public by the crowd and I suppose a handful of really impatient students who thought their waiting all day in the sun was a big waste. The poor ministers never knew they would be "baptised" with new names like "Tea boy" and "Beer-bel". Anyway, the students refused to give the petition to those ministers because our first petition this year was given to the Education Minister (just because the Prime Minister didn't come) and has had no response yet.

That night was the first night spent in front of the Morauta Haus. Both the students and the public were not going to give up and go home. It was a must that the Prime Minister received the petition in his own hands. Students told the public to go home, have something to eat and have a rest but they refused. So food and water was brought from the university mess to feed the public. It was amazing to see how understandable the public was, and how supportive and obedient they were to the student leaders. Just for that week, they committed themselves to a protest march, they totally forgot about the comfort and security of their homes; out in the cold and wind on the streets with no sheets or whatsoever to keep them warm, just to be with us.

Through the night it was peaceful, people sang songs, told stories, played cards and just did little, quiet things to keep them busy.

The crowd remained the whole day on Friday. The referendum was going to be illegal as of midnight on Friday. The Prime Minister still did not come.

On Friday night, the students and the rest of the crowd spend another night in front of Morauta Haus.

The same thing was done on Saturday night. On Sunday at 4pm, finally the Prime Minister came down to receive the petition. The SRC president, Augustine Molonges, handed it over to him and gave him 24 hours to respond to it. But did the Prime Minister respond after 24 hours, at 4pm on Monday? No. If he needed more time to discuss with his advisers, why couldn't he speak up and say so? Anyway the students and supporters, made it very clear to the police, and the Prime Minister that they weren't going to move until they had a response.

At around 9pm Monday night, students were making their way down to Morauta Haus for yet another night. This was illegal, but like I already said, "No response from PM, no leaving Morauta Haus for yet another night." Along the

Police drew their guns. The person in charge told the students to leave in 15 min. No one listened. After three warning shots, teargas was fired into the crowd... Then the police began hitting people with the butts of their guns.

way, they were stopped and sent back to the campus. The ones, who were already there since the afternoon, had no idea what was happening to the others who were supposed to make their way there. Police arrived at Morauta Haus, and drew their guns. The person in charge told the people to get up and leave the place in 15 minutes. No one listened. After three warning shots, teargas was fired into the crowd. People started running around, trying to avoid the sting of the teargas. After the firing of teargas, the police moved in and began hitting people, using the butts of their guns. Students started running away from the police. This was when the chase began. Police vehicles started going after the students. Female students, who couldn't think straight about their safety on the streets, were so afraid of the police they took off in every direction.

Somehow the police came all the way to the campus. What went on at the round about, I wouldn't know; but around 11pm they were already in the campus firing their weapons. The female students by then were already indoors. Teargas was fired as well as rubber bullets and live bullets. The shooting kept getting louder, which meant they were moving closer. The male students tried their best to keep the police from moving any further into dormitories by throwing rocks in their direction, cursing them. Female students fetched water buckets and passed them out for the guys to put out the teargas and wipe their eyes.

Watching from the very top level of Tuluon House, I could see the boys running around, diving behind trees and searching for rocks to throw. Then when the boys ran out of rocks, brave female students came out of the dormitories and collected rocks from the flower gardens and threw them out of the fence to boys. Several shots were fired towards our dormitories as well. I got hit on my right arm with a rubber bullet while I stood out on the balcony. It only swelled, but the swelling has already gone down.

UNI TAVUR TESTIMONY

All night the police were firing, and all night the male students were trying to keep them out. There was no rest for the boys. The shots were fired after every few minutes, and no pause as long as four minutes. It wasn't until between 6 and 7 on Tuesday morning did the male students try to surrender. The police had stopped firing for a while. It had been a long night, and the boys just couldn't take it any more, so they put their hands on their heads in a sign of surrender, and started waking towards the police. Suddenly the police started firing again and four guys were hit. The security vehicles picked them up and rushed them to hospital. One died instantly, another died in hospital. Around 9 am the police left. Students began to mourn for their dead fellow students. After everything quieted down, students found bullet holes in their dormitories. A female student found holes in her bed sheets and the wall in her room. A university building has little holes everywhere in the louvre blades, made from the bullets.

The relatives of one of those who got shot are now demanding K500,000 compensation from the SRC and another K500,000 compensation from the government. I don't know where the SRC is going to find that kind of money. But there was a coronial inquest and a Commission of Inquiry will investigate the killings.

Anyway, we had a state funeral for the dead on Wednesday, July 4. There were no classes. Opposition Leader Bill Skate flew in to attend. Speaker of Parliament Bernard Narokobi was there as well. Classes have resumed as usual. But just the other day, the Pro Vice Chancellor got this phone call telling him that there was a bomb in the basement of the library and in the computer labs.

The Library and computer labs were closed and the bomb squad was asked to come, but nobody came (The police have bomb experts, they were probably too afraid to even come in and check out the situation. Nothing happened after a long while, so the Pro VC presumed something was just trying to disrupt classes. But the computer lab and library are now open and school is back to normal.

Estella

□ *Estella Cheung is a second-year journalism student at the University of Papua New Guinea. This article was published in Uni Tavor, 30 July 2001. She later also gave testimony to the Commission of Inquiry.*