



Pacific Islanders use US Law to Sue British Mining Giant for Ecocide, Human Rights Crimes.

Rio Tinto: Bougainville Backgrounder

The Bougainville People

Me'ekamui, the 'Sacred Island' of Bougainville is seen by its people as a natural, God-given inheritance to be willfully preserved from generation to generation. These indigenous people flourished here for thousands of years—thriving on the island's rich resources of rain forested land and teeming rivers. Generations of Bougainvilleans built their culture into a productive self-sufficient economy.

Since time immemorial, land on Bougainville has been owned on a clan basis, being passed down from mother to daughter. Land boundaries are well known, and have been respected for thousands of years. According to custom, clans hold the rights to the land, the sky above and the earth below. Disrespecting this longtime custom, corporate greed bloodied the heart and soul of Bougainville with the construction of the Panguna mine.

Desperate Survival

Once Rio Tinto set foot on their land in 1960, the villagers witnessed almost an immediate sense of loss. Their health, environmental resources and livelihood were forsaken for corporate gain.

Almost immediately, the Bougainvilleans fell sick from exposure to the mine's toxins, chemicals and air pollutants. Upper respiratory infections such as Asthma and TB became more common, and even killed people. Children became ill with coughs, colds and chronic ear infections. Many women even died giving birth, because of the lack of basic medicine and care.

As Rio Tinto ravaged the island mining for copper, the company dumped waste rock and tailings, turning the river valleys into a virtual wasteland. Fish and whole forests died, depleting the villagers of their major food source, and eliminating their cash cropping systems. The villagers lost their property due to ongoing environmental contamination. Their water became non-potable, and they were forced to come up with other resources for survival.

Unable to live this way, the people pleaded to Rio Tinto to give them control of their own land surrounding the mine. When Rio Tinto ignored their request, the Bougainvilleans united in the name of their culture and fought for their right to their inherent resources.

The Bougainvilleans' fight for their rights left many people dead and many more injured. Three entire principal villages were relocated, and many life-long inhabitants were forced to flee the island.

With the blockade, the Bougainvilleans were completely severed from their power of electricity. They were forced to create power from what little they had. They built an electrical repair shop where townspeople turned abandoned electrical pieces into two-way radios and generators. They turned solar energy into power for electricity. Anything that wasn't nailed down was salvaged into resources for their survival.

With rain forests razed, and hillsides sluiced, the people had no other place to look, but to each other. Together they learned new skills and found new ways to utilize the resources they still did have. Coconuts became the most valuable resource on the island. People looked past this obvious food source, and developed a new process to separate the coconut oil from the pulp so that they could use it as a car fuel and heating resource.

Their will to survive led the Bougainvilleans to seek justice against the individuals who threatened their livelihood. Only now can they properly reclaim what is rightfully theirs

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