

## NATIONAL NEWS AGENCY IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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### Background

Before looking in detail at Papua New Guinea's need for a national news agency, it would be useful to look briefly at the nature and history of the country. This will provide a background against which the present needs can be viewed.

### What and Where?

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is an independent State in the Commonwealth of Nations. Queen Elizabeth II is Head of State, represented in PNG by a Governor General, who is Papua New Guinean. The country has a one-chamber Parliament, with 109 members, which chooses from among its number the executive, consisting of a Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The country comprises the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, which is the world's second largest island after Greenland, plus a number of other islands, mostly to the north, north-east edge of the Pacific Ocean.

The population is estimated at 3,500,000. They may be broadly classified as Melanesian, with some Polynesian influence in a few coastal areas, but there is enormous ethnic diversity among the many linguistic and cultural groups who are indigenous to PNG. In addition, there is a small but economically significant Chinese community and an even smaller but also significant Caucasian community (from Australia or Europe). There has been some intermarriage between Chinese and Papua New Guineans. Most of the Caucasian citizens are either unmarried or married to Papua New Guineans.

There are an estimated 750 languages indigenous to PNG, with many more dialects. This is about one quarter of the languages in the world. There are three official languages - English, Tok Pisin (sometimes called 'Pidgin' or, incorrectly, 'Pidgin English') and Hiri Motu. Tok Pisin is the main lingua franca of the New Guinea Islands, New Guinea mainland and Highlands regions. Hiri Motu is the main lingua franca of the Papua region.

The main exports are copper and coffee, with copra, cocoa and palm oil among the other important exports. Of increasing importance are gold, and spice crops. It is likely that oil will become important in future.

Education is neither compulsory nor free at primary level, though this is the declared long-term aim of the Government. Those children who start in Grade 1 are reduced in number by examinations at Grade 6, Grade 8 and Grade 10, after which the remaining successful students are allocated to four National High Schools, each of 400 students (200 Grade 11s and 200 Grade 12s). There are two universities - the University of Papua New Guinea, in Port Moresby with about 2,000 students; and the University of Technology, in Lae, with fewer students.

## History

Pre-colonial - Archaeological research is producing evidence of very early agriculture in PNG, including terracing in the Highlands. There was some traditional trading, notably the Hiri voyages in the Papua region which continued until very recently. There was also a certain amount of trade between neighbouring people, which resulted in highly prized seashells circulating in the Highlands, for instance. Otherwise, communities were mostly isolated from each other, by difficult terrain and mutual distrust, resulting in great diversity of languages and cultures.

Colonial : Early European voyages in search of trade empires troubled the area very little. Much of PNG was inhabited by fierce fighting people, many of whom practised cannibalism, so that the Europeans decided the rewards were not worth the risk. The early exception was Vogelkopf, on the north-west tip of New Guinea, which the Dutch colonised as the eastern outpost of their East Indies empire. The Dutch eventually claimed the whole western half of the island, as the Germans claimed the north-east quarter together with neighbouring islands. Britain then claimed the south-east quarter, and exchanged with Germany one of its Solomon Islands (Bougainville) for one of the parts of German New Guinea (Oro) where the Church of England had established missionary interest.

After the First World War, the League of Nations gave Australia a mandate to administer what had been German New Guinea. Shortly afterwards, Australia agreed also to administer the British part of the island, Papua.

In the 1930s gold was discovered in Bulolo and Wau, which led to exploration of the interior for the first time. It had been assumed that the high cloud-covered mountains in the centre were uninhabited, but the gold-hunting explorers discovered broad fertile valleys supporting over a million people. First contact between certain PNG people and the outside world continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and even in a limited way into the 1950s. In the 1960s the United Nations began to pressure Australia to prepare PNG for Independence. The University of Papua New Guinea was started in 1968, and the country was given self-government in 1973 under Chief Minister Michael Somare.

Post-colonial : The territories of Papua and New Guinea achieved independence on September 16, 1975, as Papua New Guinea. They have a multi-party democracy; all governments have so far been coalitions of several Parliamentary parties. There have been three Prime Ministers so far (1), the changes of government being peaceful and orderly - one by General Election and the others by votes of no-confidence in Parliament.

The Australian Government has made substantial gudgetary aid contributions to PNG since independence. By mutual agreement, this amount is being steadily reduced year by year, although the reduction is being offset to some extent by an increase in tied project aid.

PNG is a member of the United Nations, of the Pacific Forum and of the Melanesian Spearhead. It has observer status within ASEAN. It continues to have a special relationship with Australia, in commerce, defence and social intercourse.

## Media

Radio: The National Broadcasting Commission runs all radio broadcasting in PNG. It is wholly-owned by the Government. It operates two national stations are trilingual

(English, Tok Pisin and HiriMotu), but with a preponderance of English. The provincial stations generally use either Tok Pisin or Hiri Motu (depending on their location) plus a number of vernacular languages from the province.

**Newspapers:** There are two English language daily newspapers, both published in Port Moresby. The PNG Post-Courier is owned by the Herald & Weekly Times (Australia) 62.5%, Papua New Guinean private shareholders 27.5% and Australian private shareholders 10%. The Niugini Nius is wholly-owned by an Australian who is a long-term resident of PNG. There are two weekly newspapers published in Port Moresby, one in English and the other in Tok Pisin, by a company called Word Publishing, which is wholly-owned by Media Holdings Pty Ltd. That in turn is owned by a group of churches in PNG - Roman Catholic 60%, Evangelical Lutheran 20%, United 10% and Anglican 10%. There is one province: the Arawa Bulletin, which is administered by a board of trustees on behalf of the community, to whom it was bequeathed by its founder. In addition, most of the 19 Provincial Governments produce a newsletter or bulletin, most of them in English, or Tok Pisin, or a combination of the two. One is published in Motu.

**Television - Broadcast television in PNG is entirely commercial.** It was introduced in 1986, in Port Moresby only. It has during 1988 been extended to a small number of other main towns. The first company to broadcast was Niugini Television Network, owned by the Parry Corporation (Australia) 90% and a PNG citizen 10%. It started in 1986 and closed down in 1988. EM-TV started in 1987. It is owned by Bond Media (Australia) 50%, a New Zealand citizen who is a long-term resident of PNG 25%, and a PNG citizen 25%.

There is no Government control of newspapers or television in PNG, other than through the laws relating to defamation, blasphemy, obscenity, sedition and so on. Section 46 of the Constitution of PNG guarantees the right of all citizens to freedom of expression, and specific mention is made of "freedom of the press and other mass communication media". There is no licensing of any commercial media in PNG, although a Bill which proposed such licensing was presented to Parliament earlier this year. It was later withdrawn in the face of widespread opposition.

## **The Problem**

It is for this reason that it is often said that PNG has a free Press. This is true, in the sense in which the expression "free Press" is generally used, particularly in the West, to mean a Press free of Government control. PNG and India are the two outstanding examples of a free Press in a developing country, and this is something of which many Papua New Guineans are proud. However, this freedom - important as it is - is not enough unless it is accompanied by the ability to exercise that freedom. It is an old joke that the law is just like the Hilton Hotel - it is open to everybody. Yes, they are both open to everybody, but only those with enough money are able to take advantage of either.

To some extent, it is the same with the free Press in PNG. In practice, it is just Port Moresby and, to a lesser extent, Lae which have a fully functional Press; smaller towns have very little Press coverage; rural areas are largely ignored. Even in Port Moresby, the freedom available to journalists is constrained by the information which is freely available to them. They may be at liberty within the Constitution to report on remote rural areas, but can rarely afford to do so. News of happenings in Sydney, Sacramento and

Stockholm is much more readily available (via the Australian Associated Press wire service) than news of Samarai, Siassi or Simbai. As a result, much of the content of the Port Moresby newspapers is written by foreign journalists; even some reports of events within PNG are written by the Australian Associated Press (AAP) correspondent in Port Moresby, sent to Sydney and transmitted back. The effect is that Papua New Guineans are seeing their own country in part, and the rest of the world entirely, through the eyes of Australians and other foreigners.

This is not intended to be a criticism of PNG's newspapers. There is not a wealth of advertising revenue available in PNG at the moment, and commercial newspapers must operate within their financial means. They cannot afford to employ a full-time reporter in every village in the country, and must do the best they can with the limited resources available to them.

Part of the problem, then, is that not enough news is reported from and to the villages and provincial towns of PNG. But this is only the first part of a multi-faceted problem, which may be viewed as follows:

#### **Internal news flow imbalance**

In 1986, an epidemic of measles in Milne Bay Province killed a large number of children and raged on for two or three months before it was reported in the newspapers. In 1988, an increase in the number of cases of malaria in Port Moresby was reported as soon as it became apparent. Why was there this difference? It is simply that journalists can only report what they hear about, and there is nobody in Milne Bay whose job it is to tell the newspapers about what is happening there.

The newspapers report what they know, and what they know is mostly what is happening in Port Moresby. As a result, there is far more news about Port Moresby in the papers than about any other part of PNG. It would be easy to get this out of proportion, and imagine that no news from other parts of the country finds its way into the papers. This would not be true. The PNG Post-Courier, for instance, devotes several pages each day to news from other parts of the country. However, apart from four provincial towns - Lae, Mount Hagen, Goroka and Rabaul - none of the newspapers has journalists anywhere outside Port Moresby. The result is that news about the capital, and to a lesser extent those four provincial towns, is generally gathered and sifted and checked and presented in a balanced and interesting way. News from anywhere else tends to come straight from a provincial government news release, and to be one-sided and dull. Without a journalist on the spot to check things out, this is inevitable. Again this is not intended to be any criticism of the newspapers - their choice is either to give poorly reported news about these places or to give none at all. Surely it is the right decision to publish what they can.

The result is clear, though. In the eyes of newspaper readers throughout the country, Port Moresby is where interesting things happen, while the provinces are dull. This must lead to poor self-image among some people in the provinces and may well contribute to the continued drift of people to the nation's capital.

### Development in isolation

It is no coincidence that technological and industrial development have taken place fastest in parts of the world where communication is easiest. When a man discovers a better way to make fire, grow crops or move heavy loads, his discovery is of interest to everybody else with the same problems. If ideas can travel easily, then development will take place quickly, as everybody capitalises on the advances of everybody else. So it was that Europe and North America rushed ahead with their economic development while isolated communities, especially in the Pacific and Africa, got left behind.

Things are no different now. It is essential, if PNG's continued economic development is to progress as quickly as possible, that people know of the advances being made elsewhere. If a community in one Highland community has worked out a better way of drying cardamom, then people in all other cardamon-growing areas are going to want to know about it. The sooner they hear about it, the more quickly PNG as a whole will benefit from the discovery. This idea was one of the recommendations of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, established by the United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1976. Its report was published in 1980 under the title *Many Voices, One World*. Writing about the basic needs of developing countries, the report says:

All nations have to make choices in investment priorities. In choosing between possible alternatives and often conflicting interests, developing countries, in particular, must give priority to satisfying their people's essential needs. Communication is not only a system of public information, but also an integral part of education and development. (Unesco, 1980)

This leads it to make the following recommendation Recommendation 11 of its 82 recommendations:

The communication component in all development projects should receive adequate financing. So-called "development support communication" are essential for mobilising initiatives and providing information required for action in all fields of development - agriculture, health and family planning, education, religion, industry and so on (Unesco, 1980).

In other words, there is not much point trying to achieve progress in development if other people don't know what you are doing and what you need in order to carry on the good work. This kind of "development support communications" is clearly inadequate in PNG at the moment.

### Lack of local newspapers

The needs of rural and provincial urban communities in PNG are not being met fully by the Port Moresby newspapers. This is not surprising. It is impossible for a national newspaper to satisfy everybody with the content of the newspaper. A story about which readers in one province want to know everything may be of little or no interest to readers in a far-distant province. Generally, stories of specifically local interest are best dealt with by local newspapers, written for an audience exclusively within one province or region. There are some examples of such newspapers in PNG, notably the Arawa Bulletin and several publications put out by provincial governments. On the whole, though, PNG lacks local newspapers. The reasons for this are obvious - a generally low level of literacy and relatively low levels of business activity to facilitate advertising income for commercial newspapers.

Both these factors should change with time, however. The present Government of PNG has made clear its commitment to universal primary education as soon as it is practicable. This should significantly increase the potential readership for newspapers. If it works, it will also increase the potential advertising budget, since the purpose of an educated population is primarily to stimulate economic growth. *Many Voices, One World* sees local newspapers as an essential and integral part of this rural economic development. Its Recommendation 13 says:

The development of a community press in rural areas and small towns would not only provide print support for economic and social extension activities. This would also facilitate the production of functional literature for neo-literates as well. (Unesco, 1980)

### Poor international image

Papua New Guineans continually complain that the rest of the world - and particularly Australia - portrays this country as being violent, savage and primitive. Bad news, such as tribal warfare, rapes or murders, receive maximum publicity while good news, such as the opening of a new road or the smooth conduct of an election, are disregarded.

There is some justification for these complaints. Figures clearly show that there is more violent crime per head of population in Sydney than there is in Port Moresby, and yet Port Moresby's image persists, as a city where nobody is safe. Indeed, I visited Melbourne at the end of 1987, just a week after a man had walked into a city centre office block and randomly shot several people dead. When I told a local man that I lived in Port Moresby, he looked amazed, and asked me wasn't it terribly dangerous? I assured him that nobody in Port Moresby ever gunned down strangers while they worked in their offices, and asked him whether he felt safe living in Melbourne.

Of course he did feel safe there, and so did I. He knew and I knew that the shooting was an isolated incident, and not one by which to judge Melbourne as a whole. Part of the reason for PNG's poor image abroad is that people elsewhere do not know that such things are also isolated incidents there, and they have no way of knowing that anything happens in PNG to give the country the right to a better image than it has at present. Since the good news

is never reported abroad, people there are unaware that there is any good news to report. One apparent solution to this, of course, would be to deport the AAP and Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) correspondents. It is believed in some quarters that this would stop all the bad news getting out. It would not have the desired effect, however, as the Indonesian Government is discovering. Bad news will still leak out, but will be painted even worse by overseas reporters who cannot get near enough to put the problems into any sort of perspective. An alternative and better solution would be to offer a more complete picture of PNG, to counterbalance the inevitable negative news.

### **A Suggested Solution**

One suggested solution to the fourfold problem already outlined is a national news agency. Such a thing is one of the recommendations of *Many Voices, One World*:

Strong national news agencies are vital for improving each country's national and international reporting. Where viable, regional networks should be set up to increase news flow and serve all the major language groups in the area. Nationally, the agencies should buttress the growth of both urban and rural newspapers to serve as the core of a country's news collection and distribution system. (Unesco, 1980)

### **Problems With The Solution**

So, there are many reasons why a national news agency PNG seems desirable. However, there are problems associated with it, and appropriate solutions would need to be found to these problems if a serious attempt was to be made to establish a national news agency in PNG. Obvious problems are the language or languages in which the agency would operate; who is to pay for it; the danger of propaganda, too. Today I just want to consider two of those problems - propaganda and dullness.

### **Propaganda**

PNG's national news agency, if one is established, will undoubtedly rely heavily on public money, at least in its early years. This money could come from central government, or provincial government, or a combination of the two. The problem with a news agency which is paid for by the Government, however, is that it may turn into a propaganda machine. What safeguards are there that it will not do so?

First there is a simple pragmatic safeguard. The governments, national and provincial, are unlikely to want to go on paying for the news agency indefinitely. If the idea is for the agency to stimulate commercial media which will increasingly share the financial burden, then it will be in the interests of those governments to ensure that the product is what the public wants. PNG's national airline, Air Niugini, provides a commercial service with Government underwriting, and the national news agency could operate in a similar way.

To reinforce this, it might be useful to have a wide range of community represen-

tation on the news agency Board or as a consultative arm of the agency at provincial level, so that policy could be guided by the people directly rather than through the Government. It is usually when governments try to set editorial policies on behalf of the people that political propaganda begins.

### Will it be dull?

PNG's experience of publicly-funded news media gives it every right to ask this question. The demise of the Government's Office of Information (OI) in 1983 was mourned by almost nobody, because it was doing so little work at the end and what it did was deadly dull. Sadly, it is also true today of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), the largest employer of journalists in PNG, that its news bulletins are dull. If the OI and NBC have been so deadly dull, what hope is there that a national news agency will not be just as bad?

The answer, of course, is that there is no guarantee at all that it will not be dull. It will be up to the people who set it up and run it to ensure that it is not. The key will be the choice of Editor: he or she will need to be an outstanding Papua New Guinean journalist with proven administrative ability. If the job were given to a non-journalist public servant, it would without doubt be a guarantee of dullness in the product.

For the same reasons as those outlined above, the national and provincial governments will have a vested interest in ensuring that the news turned out by the national news agency is not dull. Quite simply, if it is dull, nobody will buy it - they will have to give it away.

There are other problems, too, associated with this suggested solution to the communications and news flow problems currently facing PNG. A national news agency cannot be a panacea, but it does seem to offer certain benefits, particularly to the provincial and rural areas of the country. It will be for Papua New Guineans to say whether the benefits are great enough to make it worthwhile meeting the challenge of solving the problems; and it is for Papua New Guineans to find those solutions which will best meet the needs of their unique and growing country.

### Reference

On the day that this paper was presented, a vote of no-confidence on the PNG Parliament brought down the Wingti government and made Mr Rabbie Namaliu PNG's fourth Prime Minister. *Many Voices, One World* by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (UNESCO/Kogan Page/Unipub, 1980), pages 255-256.