

The role of the United Nations Observer Mission

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent in any way the official position of the United Nations.

The United Nations Political Office in Bougainville (UNPOB) was established in August 1998 in response to a written request by the PNG government to the United Nations Security Council. The request was made as per the Lincoln Agreement, which called for the establishment of an 'Observer Mission'. For reasons of procedure and precedent, the Mission was known to the Security Council and the Department of Political Affairs in New York as a 'Political Office'. The PNG Government, however, preferred the term 'Observer Mission' and that is how it continues to be known on the ground.

UNPOB is a small mission by any standard. It is currently headed by a Director (Ambassador Noel Sinclair of Guyana) and has two Political Advisors, a Military Advisor, an administrator and a communications specialist. It is based in Arawa and is equipped with facilities commensurate to its mandate. UNPOB's formal mandate originally encompassed: (i) monitoring of the ceasefire in cooperation with the regional Peace Monitoring Group (PMG); (ii) reporting to the Security Council on a quarterly basis; and (iii) chairing the Peace Process Consultative Committee (PPCC). UNPOB was also less specifically mandated to take whatever other actions both parties agreed to in furtherance of the peace process.

UNPOB's scope for action was conditioned from the beginning by the different perceptions held by the parties to the *Lincoln Agreement*. The pro-independence factions were more favourable to UN participation, having insisted on it at Lincoln and counted on its authority to increase international attention. For the national government, the presence of the UN was a concession to the Bougainvilleans. Although the PNG government had sought and received an endorsement from the UN Security Council for the efforts of the South Pacific Forum countries to send a peacekeeping mission to support the Arawa Peace conference four years earlier, there were concerns about the implications for PNG sovereignty of international mediation in the context of a domestic dispute. Much of UNPOB's diplomacy was therefore geared to resisting the tensions created by these opposing perspectives through the faithful implementation of its mandate. This required the promotion of realistic expectations among Bougainvilleans about what the UN could deliver as well as raising the government's confidence in the mission.

Establishing the mission

The first year of UNPOB's work (from August 1998 to late 1999) was dedicated to establishing the credibility of the mission, forming relations of trust with the main actors, setting up the PPCC and assisting reconciliation among rival Bougainville factions. In this phase, UNPOB enjoyed close cooperation with the PMG, which played an instrumental role in raising confidence by investigating ceasefire violations and disseminating information about the peace process. During this period, UNPOB convened

and presided over several meetings between the national government and the Bougainville leadership, leading to a series of agreements that began to sketch the outlines of a political settlement.

UNPOB's role in political negotiations (March 2000 to June 2001)

The second phase of UNPOB's work began in early March 2000, when the Bougainville negotiating team presented their position to the national government at the Hutjena talks, on Buka island. UNPOB co-chaired these talks with the PMG Commander as per the practice developed in previous bilateral meetings.

The first test of a more substantial mediation role for the UN came at the follow-up negotiations held in late March at Loloata, near Port Moresby. The negotiations proceeded through a combination of formal chaired meetings and some informal bilaterals. The latter took place largely at the request of the national government, which was keen to negotiate in a 'Melanesian way' – by consensus among the parties after discussions. UNPOB agreed to this, keen to send a non-threatening message to the national government by illustrating that UNPOB was an observer that was not interested in removing ownership of the process from the parties. Ultimately this combined approach yielded the framework of an agreement on autonomy and on the status of Bougainville's provincial government, but failed to break the deadlock on the critical issue of referendum.

UNPOB received informal indications from both sides that its mediation would be welcome in breaking the impasse. Ambassador Sinclair therefore proposed a formulation that defined a middle ground between its perception of the two sides' positions. After further negotiation and fine-tuning, the text was finally accepted by both parties, resulting in the *Loloata Understanding*.

Loloata can be seen as a signal moment in the negotiation process for several reasons: (i) the Understanding was structured around the two cardinal points of the Bougainville position (immediate autonomy and a guarantee of an eventual referendum on independence); (ii) the successful outcome indicated to sceptical Bougainvilleans that the national government was finally prepared to take serious steps towards a negotiated solution; and (iii) it established a positive precedent for substantive UNPOB mediation.

The parties requested that the UN chair technical meetings which began in June 2000 and which were mostly dedicated to ironing out the division of powers between the national government and the putative autonomous Bougainville government. The most important contributions consisted in managing the talks, adding order and civility to the dialogue and exerting pressure on the two sides.

UNPOB was generally more assertive in its separate representations to the parties than it was around the conference table. In this regard, the relationship that UNPOB formed with the group of self-labelled 'hard-liners' was particularly important, holding frequent meetings with them to bolster their confidence in the peace process and keep them informed and involved.

UNPOB initially had a less determinate role in its relations with the national government. The government had its own analytical capacity and intelligence sources, which at first seemed to depreciate the value of UNPOB's analysis and advice in the minds of its representatives. Over time, however, the national government grew more receptive to UNPOB's inputs and an increasingly fruitful relationship developed. Ultimately, the parties came to rely on the UN but not to depend upon it.

Negotiating weapons disposal

UNPOB was given a mandate by the PPCC in 1999 to develop a plan for weapons disposal. There was a large quantity of weapons in circulation and PNGDF troops stationed on the island presented a convenient target for any armed group that might want to scuttle the peace process. The BRA insisted, however, on linking weapons disposal to progress on the political agreement and on referendum in particular. Unable to implement a plan for disposal, UNPOB worked to get BRA and BRP commanders to implement a phased plan of weapons control, by which weapons would be removed from the hands of individual combatants and put under the verifiable control of unit commanders. A subsequent plan for control and disposal was eventually reached in early 2001, involving a phased removal of weapons from the hands of ex-combatants to eventual containerisation, with community development projects providing incentives.

Conclusion

The initialling of a final political agreement in June 2001 completed the second phase of UNPOB's work. The next phase focuses on the implementation of the final agreement and UNPOB has been handed more formal responsibilities than before by the parties, particularly with regard to weapons disposal. UNPOB is ready to take on these new tasks and is preparing to increase its capacity in order to do so. Yet every post-conflict process traverses impasses where the functions of peacebuilding and preventive diplomacy seem to become indistinct. At those times, UNPOB's future role will be similar to the one it has so far played: of persuading and cajoling those who are frustrated with the pace of peace to trust in its ultimate justice.