For peace to be sustained in Bougainville, a number of key challenges face all parties to the peace deal:

- There is an imperative to honour, respect and implement every aspect of the peace deal;
- Honesty and transparency must prevail in all their dealings. This is to be maintained both at intra- and inter-factional levels;
- The PNG Government’s challenge is for successive governments to respect and continue to implement the agreements. This is because in PNG politics, ten to fifteen years is a long time to wait for a referendum on Bougainville’s ultimate political status. Given the regularity of votes of no confidence during any five-year term, the commitment of successive governments to the peace deal is absolutely vital;
- For Bougainville, the challenge is for the merged coalition of leadership to maintain unity and deliver the peace dividend; particularly to the ex-combatants who have the potential to make or break the peace deal. This is not to imply that less emphasis will be given to women or to the general public. In fact, the entire Bougainville populace must feel the peace dividend;
- The other crucial challenge that Bougainville must overcome is the need to convince Francis Ona’s Me’elamui faction that the peace deal is the answer to the Bougainville conflict. If Ona is not convinced, then there will always be that air of uncertainty about the survival of peace, lingering in the minds of some, if not all, Bougainvilleans.

How will these challenges be met?
A number of conditions have to be fulfilled by the major partners of the peace deal:

Demilitarisation
The process of making Bougainville weapon-free is well and truly underway across the island. This is a clear indication by ex-combatants that they are satisfied that the Bougainville Peace Package has all the necessary and appropriate ingredients to fulfil Bougainvilleans’ long-embedded political aspirations.

In the process of containerising all weapons, the ex-combatants are expressing tremendous confidence and trust in their political leaders. The weapons were their source of strength, confidence, comfort and protection for well over a decade of conflict. To put away their most trusted ‘friend’ is indeed an act that was unthinkable only a few years ago.

The challenge for politicians both in Bougainville and PNG as well as for international donors, is to balance the trust and confidence that ex-combatants are showing with funds that will provide employment and training...
opportunities. This indeed is a daunting challenge, as under-funding will remain a thorn preventing the smooth implementation of well-intentioned peace plans.

Development of a political institution to sustain autonomy

The second factor that the national government and the Autonomous Government of Bougainville (AGB) must address is the development of a successful political institution to sustain autonomy.

Bougainvilleans – as people whose political desires, aspirations and convictions are unparalleled in other provinces in PNG – are pinning their hopes on the sustainability of the autonomous political arrangements as an effective means of bailing them out of their misery. I personally have confidence in the determination, experience and commitment of Bougainvilleans to develop a successful political institution. They have proven their resilience beyond any reasonable doubt, having survived the Southern Hemisphere’s worst conflict since Japan’s invasion of the Pacific.

However, sustaining autonomy is a tough challenge. Adequate financial resources are crucial, particularly in the initial stages and perhaps even during the first five years of the autonomous government. Although Bougainville secured a good financial package in the Comprehensive Agreement which, if implemented fully, should guarantee a healthy start, in reality this may not be the case. PNG continues to face serious financial problems which have persisted since the Bougainville war sucked her dry of hundreds of millions of kina. Hence, the AGB will be forced to dig deep into its own pockets, utilising the financial powers that were secured in the political negotiations. This is not going to be easy because the AGB will need time to achieve the financial self-reliance that will enable it to meet the people’s needs satisfactorily.

We have seen the result of such situations. The ex-combatants become impatient with long delays in payments for tasks performed. On many occasions, they have been forced to confiscate vehicles belonging to the Provincial Government or donor organisations. The AGB will have to ensure that, whatever the funds available, a certain percentage is allocated in such a manner that the needs of ex-combatants are met right from the start. In this way, repetition of past negative incidents, during the pre-AGB days, can be avoided.

Dealing with the past and building respect for rights and the law

The third challenge that will confront the AGB is dealing with the past and building respect for rights and the law. I believe Bougainvilleans and their AGB will handle this challenge with plenty of confidence and drawing on experiences they have gained while making and building peace over the last four years since July/August 1997.

Other peace attempts from 1989, 1990, 1991, 1994 and 1995, have also left their marks, on both Bougainvilleans and the PNG Government. In fact, the Burnham Declaration in July 1997, is the culmination of all these peace attempts.

From an environment of hatred, mistrust and suspicion, Bougainvilleans have been able to build bridges of peace and reconciliation, because of the high esteem for noble traditions and customs in Bougainville, which are beautifully blended with Christian principles and teachings.

Their forefathers fought tribal wars, but whenever they made peace, those pacts were respected and honoured. Today, their sons and daughters are following in their footsteps. The Bougainville peace process, which many international observers have labelled as a unique and successful peace process, has no doubt created many precedents for other peace processes to emulate.

Bougainvilleans are confident that their AGB will harness the potential, commitment, respect and all other virtues that they have been applying, both individually and collectively, to make the peace process a success story. Ultimately this will bring about justice and overall law and order. With this in mind, the joint Bougainville leadership successfully negotiated control over the judiciary, the police and the Correctional Services Institute. Of course other functions, such as public services and financial powers are also part and parcel of the overall strategy for Bougainvilleans to bring justice, human rights and civil authority.

Whenever need arises, assistance will be sought from the national government and the international community.

Bougainvilleans’ long-term objectives are for their AGB to continue facilitating peace and reconciliation, to eventually erase all hatred and sense of betrayal that they feel towards each other and thereby return peace, harmony and unity to Bougainville. This process will continue even after the referendum determines Bougainville’s ultimate political settlement. Already, many Bougainvilleans are advocating the establishment of a Truth Commission, similar to that established in South Africa.

This augers well and reaffirms Bougainvilleans’ determination and commitment to leave bitter memories behind and build new lives under Bougainville’s political motto:

New Bougainville! New Spirit! New Deal! New Future!!