

Bougainville-World's newest country

July 14, 2020

The people of Bougainville, an island group in Papua New Guinea, held a referendum for independence recently.

The referendum

The referendum saw 85 per cent voter turnout during three weeks of voting, with 97.7 per cent of voters choosing independence from Papua New Guinea

The referendum, however, is non-binding. The ultimate outcome will be determined by a vote in Papua New Guinea's National Parliament following negotiations between the Papua New Guinean government and the Autonomous Bougainville Government.

History of the Bougainville and its referendum

Though the islands had attempted to declare independence during the formation of PNG in 1975, they were ignored.

When PNG was granted independence in 1975, Bougainville became a province.

Though there was a declaration of independence shortly before PNG was formed, it was ignored by both Australia and PNG.

The declaration was the manifestation of a Bougainville identity which developed during the 20th Century.

The primary marker of that identity was a dark skin color of most Bougainvilleas's compared to people from elsewhere in PNG.

After the failed independence declaration, in 1988 the nine-year separatist war began in which around 12-13% of the islands' population was killed.

The fighting came to an end in 1997 with help from international mediators.

The result was the Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA), the

creation of the Autonomous Bougainville Government in 2005, and the promise of a non-binding referendum on independence. Now as the referendum was non-binding, independence won't happen automatically. Discussions will take place with the PNG government to decide when or if, the transition to full independence can begin.

The new country would be small, with a landmass of less than 10,000 sq km (slightly larger than Cyprus, and slightly smaller than Lebanon). Likewise, its population would be one of the world's smallest.

Geography

Bougainville is the largest island in the Solomon Islands archipelago. It is part of the Solomon Islands rain forests Eco region.

Bougainville and the nearby island of Buka are a single landmass separated by a deep 300-metre-wide strait.

There are several active, dormant or inactive volcanoes which rise to 2400 m. Bagana (1750 m) in the north-central part of Bougainville is conspicuously active, spewing out smoke that is visible for many kilometres.

Earthquakes are frequent but cause little damage.

Implications of independence for Bouganville:

An independent Bougainville sends a strong signal for other self-determination movements across the Pacific, including in New Caledonia which will hold a second referendum for independence in 2020.

Though the referendum has raised hopes for a better future among Bougainville's "lost generation" of youth, it has also sparked a scramble for political influence among foreign mining companies, which want to establish operations in an area that contains copper and gold reserves.