

Delivery of Assessment Report Marks the Successful Completion of Phase 1 of the Panguna Mine Legacy Impact Assessment

The final Phase 1 Assessment Report of the Panguna Mine Legacy Impact Assessment (PMLIA) has been released and is now available to the public. The report is a culmination of two years of independent scientific investigations and analyses conducted by Tetra Tech Coffey, which examined the actual and potential environmental impacts caused by the Panguna Mine in Bougainville since the cessation of mining in 1989, and the social and human rights impacts directly connected to these environmental impacts.

A draft Phase 1 Assessment report was presented to the PMLIA Oversight Committee for review and feedback in May 2024. The Oversight Committee oversees the entire PMLIA process and is made up of representatives from the Government of Papua New Guinea (GoPNG), Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG), landowner and community representatives, Bougainville Copper Ltd (BCL), Rio Tinto and the Human Rights Law Centre (HRLC). An independent Technical Sub Committee, which is comprised of five experts in their respective fields, also peer reviewed the draft report at this stage to ensure the results were technically sound.

Tetra Tech Coffey then presented the draft results to impacted communities throughout Bougainville in October of this year to give community members an opportunity to provide feedback on the results which has been incorporated into the final report. Following the multiple rounds of review and feedback sessions, Tetra Tech Coffey have now completed and released the final Phase 1 Assessment Report, a summary report and summary brochure.

The report identifies a range of actual and potential environmental impacts including unstable buildings and landforms, mine-related flooding and sediment movement, elevated metal levels in the river system, mine chemicals and metals in the soil around areas that were used for processing or chemical storage and also from waste rock and tailings. The report describes how the environmental impacts are or may affect the human rights of residents living in these areas. The report presents recommendations for what needs to be remedied to address or mitigate impacts and, noting the complexity of some of these matters, recommends further investigations to address uncertainties in some cases. It does not make recommendations on how the impacts should be remedied.

The delivery of the Phase 1 Assessment Report provides long-awaited answers to questions impacted communities have about their surrounding environment since the cessation of mining at the Panguna Mine. Phase 1 consisted of multiple rounds of community dialogues with impacted communities to answer questions and collate feedback on the PMLIA process.

Independent facilitator, Mr. Martin Brash said, “The process of engagement with communities has been a key feature of the PMLIA. Communities have given their consent for the process every step of the way and were active both as participants and advisers to the research. Just last month, we shared the draft results with communities and sought their feedback. As they receive the final report this week, there can be no doubt that no effort was spared in seeking community input and ownership.”

In receiving the report, President of Bougainville Honourable Ishmael Toroama said, “This is a significant milestone for Bougainville, one that helps us move away from the damage and

turmoil of the past and strengthen our pathway towards a stronger future. I am especially appreciative of the impacted communities and the Human Rights Law Centre who pushed for this project and for the cooperation offered by GoPNG, ABG, local Chiefs, Rio Tinto and BCL to see it through to this stage, despite any doubts and hurdles that arose. To Rio Tinto, I want to say thank you for opening up to this process and giving it genuine attention and input.”

On receipt of the report, Chief Secretary of Bougainville, Kearnneth Nanei, spoke to the importance of following through on the recommendations of the report, “ABG is committed to maintaining its participation alongside stakeholders and community leaders in the Oversight Committee which will both oversee and monitor the next stage of efforts which will include remediation and research activities. Furthermore, noting that many of the remediation activities will entail sensitive regulatory and commercial considerations, the ABG is happy to have entered into a Roundtable arrangement with BCL and Rio Tinto to work together, consult with impacted communities, and establish a process to address the actual and potential impacts identified in the assessment report.”

As the final report and corresponding summary documents were delivered to officials, a two-week community engagement campaign has commenced in the impacted areas in Bougainville to let the impacted communities know where they can access the report in both English and Tok Pisin and gain their feedback on the PMLIA process to date.

“The most important thing is that I can see a strong way forward emerging for our people in the impact area” said Chief Blaise Iruinu from the Oversight Committee. “This process has been based on dialogue, empathy and cooperation, now we look forward to continued cooperation and tangible action to addressing the impacts.”

The Panguna Mine Legacy Impact Assessment resulted from a human rights complaint brought against Rio Tinto in 2020 by 156 residents of villages around the Panguna Mine, alleging the mine was causing ongoing adverse environmental and human rights impacts on local people. The complaint sought commitments from Rio Tinto to fund an independent impact assessment of the mine; engage with communities to help find solutions and undertake reconciliation; and contribute to a substantial, independently managed fund to help address harms and assist long-term rehabilitation efforts. Following constructive discussions facilitated by the Australian OECD National Contact Point, the PMLIA was agreed, and the multi-stakeholder Oversight Committee was established to oversee the process.

The Panguna Mine, which was one of the largest copper mines in the world during operations from 1972 to 1989, was a significant contributor to Papua New Guinea’s economy. The cessation of operations due to a devastating 10-year civil conflict was in part sparked from concerns around the management of the mine and its environmental and social impacts. Many of these concerns up until now have been largely left unaddressed.

The report is available for download at:

http://www.tanorama.com/pangunasecretariat.html#ps_updates or the following stakeholders can be contacted for further information.

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