

We Discovered We Weren't Alone: surfing the net in Papua New Guinea

From an interview with Stanis Kaka by Notes from Nowhere

Economic independence struggle

In Papua New Guinea we got our independence from Australia in 1975. It was given, as a gift. We never struggled for independence. They just gave it to us, and we accepted. But it wasn't an economic independence, it was only political independence. But without economic independence we can't run our country. And what is actually happening now is they are trying to take over our lives.

The World Bank and the IMF came in [in 1991] and offered 'assistance', and the Papua New Guinean Government accepted. Since then we have been told that we are millions of dollars in debt to them, but we can't afford to repay. In 1995 the World Bank and the IMF declared our debt unpayable, and came up with 27 policy conditions that

the government had to implement by 1996, or Papua New Guinea would not be able to access any more loans.

[Those policies] include the Customary Land Registration Act – 97 per cent of our land is customary [tribal or collective] land. Most of the people cannot afford to register land, and so are losing it to the state.

We were against those policies and we led a strike in 1996, in which two people were killed. There followed a general strike against the World Bank then, and the Government gave orders that the people who were leading should be arrested – including myself. We thought that we were the only ones who were controlled by the World Bank and the IMF. And I, too, thought that when I was leading the strike.

We were waiting to see if our Government would continue pursuing these policies. And what happened was in 2001 the World Bank and IMF pushed for the same conditions for the next loan. As a result, all of the university students went on a peaceful sitting protest, and four of them were killed on 25 June 2001. They were sitting all day in front of the Parliament building, and that

forums begin to spring up on every continent.

>> **February 8** >> Ukrainians in Kharkov say "Nyet!" to McDonald's, as 6,000 turn out to stop the construction of a new franchise in the city centre. Dressed in bloody aprons and wielding dripping knives, the people decry the company as the leading serial killer (of animals) in the world. Local authorities concede to demands, and prohibit the construction from taking place!

>> **February 9** >> Following days of protests and blockades by coca workers, resulting in several deaths, Bolivian officials agree to suspend coca eradication efforts and guarantee the normal functioning of the coca leaf market at Sacaba, Cochabamba, for 90 days while a commission of government representatives and *campesino* leaders reviews laws which criminalize the transport and sale of coca leaves. Many of the protesters' deaths are

attributed to the Special Security Group, a police unit popularly known as *Dálmatas* (dalmatians), which was trained by the US military. One *Dálmata* officer claims that the unit has "a certain specialty and an affinity for dealing with confrontational civilian groups."

>> **February 18** >> Thirty Korean students from *Hanchongryon* (Federation of Korean University Student's Association) barricade themselves in the American

evening the police asked them to leave, but they refused. The police came and used firearms to disperse them, and killed four of them, and seventeen were hospitalized.

And since then I've opened my eyes, collected information. Concerned people were getting in touch with me, writing letters and saying, "That's what the World Bank is doing to Malaysia, to Africa, and to other parts of the world." And I thought, wow, other people in all these different countries are struggling – well that is not a bad thing.

And so I'm interested in making international links. Earlier this year when I was using my friend's internet I began to realize the internet is access to everything. I find it very easy, instead of waiting two to three months to get a letter. So when I was invited to come [to the PGA conference], it was a great opportunity for me to see what people from other countries are experiencing and get experiences from them.

Burgers from Interpol

When I arrived in La Paz the immigration officer asked me where I was going and I said to travel 'round. They started saying to me, "You're not going there, you don't have a place to stay." I said that someone was picking me up at the airport, and they rang Cochabamba to check. Then I said I was going to a hotel and they could get in touch with me there and they said, "No you're not, you're going back to Papua New Guinea." And I said, "Why am I going back?!" And they said, "You don't have any legitimate reason to be here. And you are going to that PGA conference so we are

"Since 1993/1994 when we began the campaign against the corporate take-over of Papua New Guinea by the World Bank/IMF, the struggle has been long and bitter... And it has also been bloody, with our students paying with their lives... We know too, that our struggle and campaign is the same being waged all over the world by those of you who, like us, are opposed to the take-over and domination of our world by multinational and transnational corporations."

- Powes Parkop, Anti-Privatization Alliance, Papua New Guinea

sending you back." The man who interrogated me was working with Interpol [the international police force] and I gave him my telephone number and told him everything, and said, "If you want to ring my family, ring them and they will tell you the truth." They were trying to see if there was space on the plane to deport me but there were no seats. Finally, a lawyer rang and came and bailed me out.

I stayed in that airport office for two nights – sitting and sleeping. They sometimes came with burgers but I didn't take them. I just ate one piece and left it on the shelf, saying, "I didn't come all this way to sit here and eat this

kind of food.” The man who came to bail me out shook my hand and said “Good luck.”

I will tell my people

I work with Kasalpalou, a community organization which raises awareness campaigns about our land, and fights the appropriation of our land through the Land Registration Act. We have a lot of mineral resources in our province. The experience of many provinces in my country is that corporations come in and log and mine but they don't care about the environment, they just do what they like. That's why we formed our group. It wasn't made with outside influence or help, it just consists of village people.

Despite the fact that the university strikes came out against the World Bank, many village people think these policies are only to do with the educated people, like the students, and that it won't affect them. They say, “That's nothing to do with us, we enjoy our life here, we have food and shelter.” But they don't know that the Government is making laws that will affect them, everyone, not just the few people struggling.

Most village people are not educated but we communicate well with them. There are no telephones or other forms of communication; we use word of mouth and we have a local radio program. There are six districts in the Inga province in which we go around talking to people.

Eighty-five per cent of our population live in the villages. We live in extended families and most of us are pretty happy. Like me – I had a job, but left it and for the last 15 years I've been in the village. But I can survive. I have land there. I can grow my own food. I have three houses in the village, whereas in the city I would have to rent a place! But in the village I have three houses and I own them. I don't have to pay for anything! I don't have electricity bills and I don't have water bills and I don't pay rent. Actually I find it very easy! And that's what I judge things by. Because I see people are struggling under the rules of the World Bank and the IMF, and I find out that the world's people in other countries are struggling also and seeing them as enemies, and then I know there must be something wrong with these institutions.

When I go back home I will tell my people, “Listen, we think we are helpless, but we're not.” My people normally

Chamber of Commerce in downtown Seoul to protest against a range of military and economic issues associated with President Bush's visit. Occupying the office in the World Trade tower for four hours before being arrested, they knock out windows and replace them with a large sign which reads, “No War! No Bush!”

>> **February 18** >> In Buenos Aires, Argentina, a group of hundreds of depositors, whose savings accounts have

been 'structurally adjusted' by the government, tour the financial district. Banging pots and pans, they demand the return of their money, and smash up 17 banks in broad daylight and in full view of the police, who follow them sheepishly from bank to bank.

>> **February 19** >> Dutch activists from the group *Amsterdamsche Radicale Klimaatactivisten* cause a stink at a carbon trading conference in Amsterdam. Wearing blue

wigs and armed with water pistols and farting-gas to emphasize that “carbon trading stinks”, they occupy the conference room, holding up the conference for two hours, and forcing delegates to be relocated. Outside the conference, in hail and icy gusts of wind, a group distributes flyers, plays samba music, and does street theatre for the passersby.

>> **February 20** >> Public employees, teachers, doctors,

come and they say, “You’re nobody. You’re not a politician. You’re nobody special. You’re just a village person and you are struggling out here and these people are coming with money. These people have all the power. And they can kill you.” And what I’m telling the people now is that what I am doing will have a big impact in the future. That’s what I tell them. So when I was invited to come here, they realized that something was happening across the world.

We can outnumber them

Awareness and distribution of the message in Papua New Guinea is slim. A Malaysian logging company runs our second newspaper, so when we put anything about mining or logging in the newspaper they will never publish it. I have tried to write about this ten or twenty times and when I ring them to find out what has happened to my article they say the Chief Editor has refused to publish it. So when I go back I am going to put my programme on a provincial radio station. Now they are banning our form of awareness-raising through the radio station. The radio station manager is my friend, so he lets me speak. But gradually they will stop it. That is why I am looking at ways to set up my own community radio station, so awareness will carry on being built there. We have no other means of communicating so we put our programmes out to let people know what the mining and logging people are doing – every fortnight.

We have lots of mineral resources in our ground and thick rainforest, and the big companies are coming in and taking out our resources in raw form without them even

“We are like rats fighting the elephants. People struggling for the land are being killed for it, but the word is more important than violence... We the people are going to make a big hole for the elephant to fall in.”

– Stanis Kaka at an international climate change gathering, 2002

being processed in Papua New Guinea. [These ‘rip and ship’ policies prevent the development of manufacturing in resource-rich countries, while avoiding higher tariffs or import taxes, for Northern corporations]. So it’s going out raw, not even as timber. Some big companies – especially Japanese and Malaysian ones – are logging. And our Government can’t pay back the money to the World Bank.

And yet our Government is inviting them in. I don’t why. I don’t know what’s wrong with the Governments of this world. We normally vote our representative into the Parliament, and before they get elected we educate them, question them, and all that. We ask them, “Are you going to fight for us?” But they promise us everything, and once they get into the Parliament they are 100 per cent different. They just dance to the tune of the IMF and World Bank and the Government. So when they come back we say, “When we elected you, you told us different things, but since you got into the Parliament you haven’t raised your voice and you haven’t done anything.”

They say, “I am only one person myself and I can’t do

anything. We have got a democratic system, but this is what happens.” But the population of Papua New Guinea is four million. And if four million of us stand up for what is right – there are, I think, only 109 members of parliament – we can outnumber them. That’s what I say to them when I go to the villages. I say, “There are four million of us, four million people of Papua New Guinea; we can speak for our own rights better than those people. Our elected members in parliament don’t have any authority – we do.” That’s our message. We have got a right. That’s what I believe in.

So I would say that this is the real independence struggle of Papua New Guinea. Political independence was gained, but we are struggling for economic independence now. And so far two people died in 1996, four died in June – and probably we are looking at 1,000 people dying before we get economic independence. With the blood of those people, we will get economic independence.

It’s not that I am going to end it. When I become old and die, that’s not the end. I have children. And I have told them, “Fight to the end of your life.” So I am training them. I am educating them so they will say, “What my father

fought for, I am fighting for too.”

I used to work for an Australian company doing mining in my own province, but I pulled out. I was working in a laboratory analyzing everything for them and I saw the amount of the waste going in the water system. I didn’t agree with this and so I pulled out. And that is the reason for me being really active. People said to me: “You had a job there! You had a good wage! Why don’t you just close your mouth and just go along with them?” I replied that this is my province, and I know what is actually happening. And if I close my mouth and enjoy what is given to me, when I am dead my children will just take out my bones and throw them away. That’s why I resigned my job and am now telling my people what is actually happening.

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Interview by Notes from Nowhere / Katharine Ainger

Resources: » Interviews from the Cochabamba conference make up the book: *Desire for Change – women on the front line of global resistance* from: LARC, 62 Fieldgate Street, London E1 1ES, UK or pgabolivia@yahoo.co.uk

the unemployed, account-holders, pensioners, and students flood the streets in Buenos Aires and at least ten provinces of Argentina. Unemployed workers protest at the central offices of Repsol-YPF, a transnational oil company, demanding “50,000 real jobs and urgent food aid”. The head of the teachers’ union says, “Every day, another 1,700 workers are left without a job and enter the circuit of poverty. And those of us who do not lose our jobs have

to put up with salary cuts, unpaid wages, and restructuring in the midst of an inflationary process.” >> **February 20-25** >> Indigenous people, farmers, and municipal workers occupy the oil industry infrastructure in the northeastern provinces of Sucumbios and Orellana, Ecuador. Local residents erect roadblocks, blockade the airport, and occupy oil wells, demanding compensation for ecological damage wrought by a crude oil pipeline. The

President declares a state of emergency; one person is killed and nine seriously injured by the police. The following month, a tree village established in an attempt to protect the Mindo-Nambillo forest, is brutally evicted. The Government eventually concedes and declares that ten per cent of revenues generated by the pipeline will return to local communities affected by it. So the IMF withdraws a loan, as they oppose the ten per cent allocation.