

+ **Cesare Bonivento PIME**
Bishop of Vanimo



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OPEN LETTER

The Right Honourable Sir Michael T. Somare GCMG CH
Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea
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Dear and Honourable Prime Minister,

Open Letter to the Prime Minister and Government of Papua New Guinea - Concerning the West Papuan Refugees in Vanimo

From a press statement issued by the Minister for Foreign Affairs (20 Feb 2003) we came to know that only six families of the border-crossers presently in Vanimo will be granted the refugee status, while all the others will be repatriated on a voluntary basis.

From the Post Courier (3 March 2003) we read that if the border-crossers refuse to go back on a voluntary basis "police would be used to forcefully repatriate them."

From the press Release of the Department Foreign Affairs of Jakarta we read that "the repatriation of those border-crossers is planned to take place on 13 March 2003, by using sea transportation provided by the Indonesian Government".

You can understand that such news has caused a great surprise and a sentiment of bitterness in Vanimo Diocese.

We have been involved in the problem of the refugees since November 2000 when the Government of PNG invited us and were grateful for us to take

care of the "refugees", as it is stated in the letter sent to us by Mr. Leo Meninga, the Secretary of Provincial Affairs, on the 27th Nov. 2000.

You know very well that we honored such a request, even though we have been facing a lot of bureaucratic and financial difficulties.

We have continued for more than two and a half years with this request, hoping that the Government of PNG would soon find an honourable solution for the border-crossers.

This is why we were very happy when the PNG Government approved and commenced, with the assistance and auspices of the UNHCR, the investigation process in order to grant the status of refugees to those who were found to be eligible.

We were very happy when the news spread that the result of that investigation process was the recommendation that 85% of the border-crossers families be granted the refugee status.

It was a great honor for PNG to do that, perfectly in tune with the many International Agreements signed by our Government.

Instead suddenly we come to know now that only 6 families have been granted the status of refugees, while the other 96 have to be repatriated at any cost with the cooperation of Indonesian Government. The Indonesian Government said in their Press Release that they are very pleased with the decision of the Government of PNG and above all with the decision of the border-crossers "who have voluntarily chosen to return to their home village in the Province of Papua".

Sir, I feel obliged to inform you that not one of those border-crossers has chosen to go back to Indonesia. A few days ago I went to the "border-crossers camp" to talk with them about the decision of Government of PNG. It was very hard to talk in front of men, women, and children astonished and in tears. And when eventually it has been possible to talk they begged me to do anything that I could in order to avoid their repatriation, because they stated: "we know very well what has been the fate of those who have been repatriated previously". Not one of them "have voluntarily chosen to return to their home village in the province of Papua" as it has been inappropriately stated by the Indonesian Press Release on 25 February 2003.

Sir, we are in front of people who did not come to Vanimo to illegally make business. They came up here because they were in fear of their lives, and

they are still here because of that. They are desperately looking for a shelter, where they can protect their lives.

Sir, to protect ones life it is the first and most basic of the Human Rights. To ignore that or to act against that, it is to follow an antihuman policy. I am sure that the Government of PNG does not want to do that and to be labeled as a Government against the Human Rights. Our Government is a democratic one, very proud to protect the Human Rights of its citizen and of anybody seeking protection in its territory.

On behalf of all those border-crossers I am asking you to support such a great tradition already established in PNG.

Sir, we do not want to interfere with your political rights: we acknowledge that you have the right to make political decisions. However a good political decision must always be supported by good moral grounds. If not, even though a legitimate one, it will be dangerous and counterproductive.

Sir, as a religious leader and from a Christian point of view I can not accept what has been written on the Post Courier on 3-3-2003, because it is antihuman.

Not even the need of favoring good international relationship for Papua New Guinea can justify such a denial of the Human Rights.

Sir, we can accept that for political reasons you may have the duty to deny the status of refugees to the present border-crossers, but in our opinion you still have the duty to protect those in fear of their lives.

Between these two duties there is room for solutions, respectful of Human Rights.

The Diocese of Vanimo is praying that by the help of the Lord honourable solutions may be found in full respect of both the Sovereignty of Papua New Guinea and those who fled to PNG in fear of their lives.

Yours respectfully

+ Cesare Bonivento PIME
Bishop of Vanimo
6th March 2003