

Australians face travel ban to PNG's Bougainville

Sydney, Australia: Papua New Guinea has banned Australians from travelling to the politically sensitive autonomous region of Bougainville, officials said Monday, after Canberra announced plans to open a diplomatic mission there.



Serge Bertasius Photography via
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Australia revealed proposals for a new mission in resource-rich Bougainville last week, ahead of an independence referendum expected to be held within the next five years. PNG Prime Minister Peter O'Neill earlier said the plans came as a shock and he had not been consulted on them.

"The Papua New Guinea government has announced a ban on travel to Bougainville by Australian passport holders on tourist, business and other short-term entry visas," the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade said in a travel advisory.

"Authorities have announced that the ban will not affect Australians residing in Bougainville on work and permanent resident visas."

Bougainville was promised the right to hold an independence referendum between 2015 and 2020 under a peace agreement made in 2001 which followed an almost decade-long, bitter guerrilla war.

Bougainville's separatist conflict was the bloodiest in the Pacific since World War II, and ended when the New Zealand government helped broker a truce signed by all factions in 1997, but not before some 10,000 people had died.

Elections are currently underway on the island. It is expected that the new government, which will be announced in June,

will call for the referendum to be held. PNG's O'Neill said last week that there had been no agreement with

Canberra to set up a mission on Bougainville, and Foreign Minister Rimbink Pato would investigate.

"As we respect the territorial integrity of others, we expect others to respect ours as well," O'Neill said at the time.

Pato issued a statement on Monday saying he had instructed the chief migration officer to impose the ban "with immediate effect", the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported.

"All diplomatic and foreign government officials wishing to visit Bougainville must seek clearance from the Department of Foreign Affairs before travelling," the ABC cited him as saying.

Australia's Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said the mission in Buka had been discussed between officials from both countries last year.

Source: AFP

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