Bougainville: May become Nation No.194

Why in News?

With Bougainville's overwhelming vote for independence from Papua New Guinea (PNG), the country has crossed a milestone in the peace process following the 1998 civil war.

What did the voting process reveal?

- The non-binding referendum was a promise enshrined in the 2001 Bougainville Peace agreement.
- This referendum was promised so as to ascertain a **preference for either greater autonomy or separate statehood**.
- In a province of fewer than 3,00,000, the voting process underscored the challenges facing the regional administration in Buka and that in the national capital of Port Moresby.
- The Bougainville Referendum Commission undertook the commendable task of enlisting inmates in hospitals and prisons and non-residents to ensure that the conduct of the franchise was inclusive.
- A testament of the participation was the 85% turnout in the plebiscite.
- With **98% opting to secede**, the people spoke emphatically at the end of an animated campaign.
- The Central government had hoped that the region would vote to remain rather than secede.
- The Bougainvillians and observers, the choice for separation was a foregone conclusion.

What is the story behind?

- The **demand for separate statehood** in Bougainville dates back almost to PNG's independence in **1975**.
- This sentiment was further crystallised by the **conflict over the open cast copper mine** in Panguna town.
- Its revenues accounted for over 45% of the country's export earnings.
- In the confrontation that centred around sharing the mineral resources, the Bougainville Revolutionary Army was pitted against the PNG security forces for a decade.

What is next?

- **Enforcing** the Bougainville verdict is **bound to be protracted**.
- This is a characteristic of the political and administrative processes of carving out the boundaries of a new state.
- Foremost, in an attempt to give shape to the decision, Port Moresby and Buka will engage in negotiations.
- Any agreement would have to be ratified by the country's Parliament.
- In a sign of the future shape of events, the PNG Minister responsible for Bougainville recently expressed concern that Buka could set a precedent for any other breakaway movement.
- There are issues around the economic viability of the tiny island group.
- The controversy over the Panguna mine still lingers, as the company that once controlled operations is vying for restoration of its licence.
- The Bougainville government **would inevitably have to revisit that decision** sooner rather than later.
- But the advent of the world's 194th nation may be some distance in the future.

Source: The Hindu

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