

## Franco Zocca: APPENDIX: LIFE EXCURSUS OF MR BELDEN NORMAN NAMAH

Belden Norman Namah, the fourth of five children, was born on December 30st 1969 in Somboi Village in Bewani area, south of Vanimo. Allegedly his family was originally from Krisa. His father was a SDA pastor, who brought up his children in a strong Christian way. After completing High School in Vanimo in 1985-86 and Sogeri National School in 1987-88, the young Namah joined the PNG Defence Force and quickly rose to the grade of captain. In that capacity he was involved in operation in Bougainville starting in 1993 till 1997.

In March 1997 he played a key part in the *Operesen Rausim Kwik* (Quick Chase Out Operation) against the *Sandline* mercenaries, who were due to take over Bougainville. In July of the same year he was involved with three other officers in an action to obtain by the newly appointed Prime Minister Bill Skate the disbandment of the Special Operation Group, to which the military was hostile. That action was considered a sort of mutiny and Namah with two other fellow officers was tried, convicted and jailed for six years. The following is how he describes the episode:

In 1997 when Sir Julius Chan's government contracted the Sandline mercenaries to wipe out the entire Bougainville people, I demanded Sir Julius to step down and deported the mercenaries from Papua New Guinea. I knew the consequences... For my country I served six and a half years in prison for which I have never asked the people of Bougainville for anything or claimed credit for my actions (quoted by Post Courier May 28 page 3)

However, in another interview with John Eggins during the third episode of the TV program Election Forum, he gave a different version of the imprisonment story:

"I was arrested in 1997 and sentenced to 6 and half years in prison with three other companions. I spent 2 and half years in jail and was pardoned in 2005 by the Governor General Paias Matane".

After being pardoned, Namah returned to his home place and got involved in logging business and managed to get the support of the timber resource owners (50 ILGs?) of his home place, his "back-yard" as he calls it, the Bewani area of Sandaun province, rich in highly valuable tropical hardwoods like kwila and teak. He became extremely wealthy in a short time. How it happened is still controversial. This is one version:

"He was just smart when going about gaining the support of the timber resource owners in the Bewani District of the Sandaun Province, who accorded him power of attorney to act on their behalf. As he is paid his commission, he makes wise investments and his wealth accumulates so much that he becomes a self-made millionaire". (Moais Gabuar in Keith Jackson and Friends internet blog: PNG ATTITUDE)

[Http://asopa.typepad.com/asopa\\_people/2012/05/balancing the ledger on Belden Namah](http://asopa.typepad.com/asopa_people/2012/05/balancing_the_ledger_on_Belden_Namah)  
Retrieved on 30 May 2012

Representatives of the Incorporated Landowner Groups (ILGs), however, tell different stories, which I have recorded. They accuse Namah of making use of the Special Agricultural and Business Lease (SABLs) in order to grab their land and sell their forest to foreign companies (1.2 billion? 2.5 billion?) and to deprive the landowners of any income apart the initial K50,000.

Belden called the elders of the ILGs, gave the money (*kol many*), have they sign the papers, and that's was all. He took some of them to Singapore. No royalties since them. (young Bewani landowner)

I was shown copy of a document, dated July 13<sup>th</sup> 2008, in which Bewani Forest Product Ltd, chaired by Mr Namah, got a lease on 139,909ha in Bewani for 99 years. The damage caused to his electorate's forest and people has been documented in a film titled *Bikpela Bagarap* (The Great Destruction)<sup>1</sup>. One of those disgruntled landowners group took its case to court and on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011 managed to get excised 31,430ha from the Bewani Forest Product Ltd, which has now 108,479ha. Another common explanation, among others, on how Namah became so rich, is that during his tenure as Minister for Forest no logging shipment could leave Vanimo harbor without a certain percentage (8%?) of the shipment's value being deposited in Namah's private account.

Having become rich, Namah then enters the political arena and in 2007 is elected to parliament as the Member for Vanimo-Green River. His candidacy is endorsed by the National Alliance Party. He gets 33% of the first preferential votes and he is elected with 7574 votes (53% of the live votes). The National Alliance Party Leader, Sir Michael Somare becomes prime minister and appoints Mr. Namah Minister for Forestry. This appointment causes controversy because of perceived potential for conflict of interest as a forest landowner and principal of a company involved in logging in Sandaun province. In April 2008, as new Forest Minister, Mr Namah tells parliament that logging companies routinely flout laws with the help of corrupt officials. He has noticed a lot of corruption going on within the Forest Department.

At the end of 2008 Belden Namah set up the so called "Sandaun Border Rangers" a sort of paramilitary force whose role was allegedly that of patrolling the border area and of keeping peace and good order. The force was mostly composed by young men recruited in Lido (Vanimo Village). They were not armed but they managed to harass people and create havoc in the region. At the end of January 2009 there was a confrontation between the rangers and the local police and Belden Namah was forced to find refuge in the army barracks. Eventually the Government of Sir Michael sent army personnel (task force) to disband the Sandaun Border Rangers.

In July 2009 *Samoa Observer* reports that Namah has purchased three properties in the country for a total of \$1.5 million. After initially denying the story, he admits making the purchase on behalf of unnamed business associates.

In July 2010 Namah defects from National Alliance Party with other parliament members in a plot to remove Prime Minister Michael Somare. The plot does not succeed but in October he takes over leadership of PNG Party from founder and former Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta. At that time the PNG Party counts 13 members in parliament.

In late October 2010 an agreement is signed between a Malaysian company and the local landowners led by Mr. Namah for the development of the 140,000ha Bewani Oil Palm project. The Bewani project involves more than 120 incorporated land groups, which are associated in the so called Bewani Palm Oil Development Ltd. The project is expected to benefit about 8,000-10,000 people. However the project is now opposed by many landowners, since it will strip off large parts of the forest of all trees and induce the former landowners to become manual workers in multinational palm oil companies. The author during his stay in Bewani in the month of July 2012, has noticed thousand of seedlings, already grown big in the nurseries, which could not be transplanted because of landowners' opposition.

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<sup>1</sup> Full film: [vimeo.com/23044290](http://vimeo.com/23044290); also in <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvL9N2WP6AU>

In late January 2011 a PNG military operation called *Operation Sunset Merona* descends on remote West Papua refugee border camps in the Bewani area and around Vanimo, burns down many houses and arrests the refugees who could be caught. Namah condones the harsh operation and explains in his statement that this was to destroy OPM camps on the PNG side of the border.

On the 2d of August 2011, the government of acting Prime Minister Sam Abal (standing in for Somare who is sick in Singapore) is ousted in parliament. Peter O'Neill is elected to the premiership, and appoints Belden Namah as his Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Forestry and Climate Change. The number of PNG Party parliament members soars to 25 in a few days. The new Government, while its legitimacy was challenged in Court, takes several popular decisions, like free education and free health services.

In November 2011, as the Supreme Court prepared to hear a case of legitimacy of the O'Neill government, Namah orders the suspension of Chief Justice Sir Salamo Injia, as Injia was facing charges of breaching a contempt order, and mismanaging court finances. The Supreme Court reacts by ordering Namah's arrest, and that of the Attorney General Dr. Allan Marat. Namah is quickly bailed out and begins a prolong battle against the Judiciary.

On December 12<sup>th</sup> the Supreme Court rules that the ousting of the absent Prime Minister Michael Somare in August was illegal since there was never a vacancy in that position. The parliament, however, refuses to reinstate Michael Somare as Prime Minister and re-elect Mr. O'Neill. Mr. Namah is re-appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Forestry and Climate Change.

In March 2012 a Sydney newspaper reports that in April 2011 Namah was asked to leave a local Casino, allegedly for public drunkenness and sexually harassing a blackjack dealer. He was later readmitted after the Casino staff realized that he and his colleagues planned to gamble hundreds of thousands of dollars. However, Ben Namah denies he is the person described in the newspaper.

On March 13<sup>th</sup> 2012 in the "PNG exposed Blog" appears the news that Mr. Namah was allegedly implicated in the so called "oil palm fraud". The Malaysian developer Mr. Andrew Lim of Maxland PNG Ltd, who invested heavily in the oil palm project, had complained of having been misled in signing the agreement with Bewani Oil Palm Development Ltd since in the meantime its shares were transferred to another company, the Million Miles Group Ltd. Mr. Lim announced that he and his company has initiated a litigation process to recoup their lost money.

In April 2012, parliament passes a motion, introduced by Namah, to defer by six months the five-yearly elections, sparking an outcry of many civil and political groups. The prime minister, however, guarantees that elections would proceed as scheduled, although calls from Mr Namah for deferral continue. In the meantime Mr. Namah introduces a motion, later passed by parliament as The Judicial Conduct Act, according to which the Parliament could ask the Governor General to suspend judges of the Supreme Court.

In late April 2012 Namah is flying back from Malaysia on board of PNG Government Falcon Jet, when Indonesian military jets appear to escort the Falcon to the PNG border. As it happened, that flight was supposed to have on board the international fugitive Tjoko Chandra Soegirto, whom the Indonesian government wants to return funds allegedly stolen from the Reserve Bank of Indonesia. Mr Soegirto has strong business connections in PNG in partnership with several PNG politicians. Soegirto's jet landed in Port Moresby Jackson International Airport and the businessman was met by the Prime Minister and his deputy Belden Namah. The whole episode raises strong suspicions that a movement of hard cash was involved. Namah was extremely upset of the whole episode, afraid that his Falcon Jet could be shot down. He complained with the Indonesian government and even asked

O'Neill to resign for not having taken a stronger stand against the Indonesian Aviation Army behavior.

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On the 21<sup>st</sup> of May 2012 a majority opinion of three out of five Supreme Court judges declares that the second election of Peter O'Neill as prime minister on Dec 12 2011 was unconstitutional, as it was that of the 2d of August. In response Mr. Namah demands the resignation of Sir Salamo Injia within 24 hours. Injia refuses to resign. Parliament, however, two days later, re-elects Mr. O'Neill as prime minister. Mr. Namah is appointed Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Forestry and Climate Change, and Minister of Defense. He continues to maintain those positions in the caretaker government.

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On May 21 2012 a majority opinion of three Supreme Court judges declares that the election of Peter O'Neill as prime minister on Dec 12 2011 was unconstitutional, invalid and on no effect. The parliament was recalled for the next day and re-elect Peter O'Neill as Prime Minister, having Belden Namah as his deputy. In the course of the Constitutional crisis, which started in August 2011, Mr. Namah was appointed Deputy prime Minister three times and twice sworn in. Two days later, in the final sitting of Parliament a motion, presented by Mr. Maladina, was passed declaring a state of emergency in three provinces: Port Moresby, the Southern Highlands, and the new Hela Province.

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On Thursday May 24<sup>th</sup> Mr. Namah storms into the Supreme Courtroom and orders the accompanying police to arrest the Chief Justice Salamo Injia and to charge him with sedition. He later justifies his action with these words:

My kind of leadership is new and one that many are not used to but I believe it is the kind of leadership the nation needs (Post Courier Wednesday June 6, p 26).

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Later, in the interview given in their episode of Election Focus, Namah admitted to John Eggings that he knew that what he did was wrong but it had to be done for the benefit of the whole country. All the controversial initiatives taken by Mr Namah since he became deputy prime minister are not without criticism on the part of the judges, mass media and civil society groups. Rallies are held by students, trade unions and other NGOs on the wake of the passing of the law attacking the Judiciary. In June 8<sup>th</sup> rallies of Judges are held in Port Moresby and Lae, in which severe criticism is addressed towards several decisions taken by parliament, especially those which directly attacked the Judiciary. The two daily PNG newspapers are also generally very critical of the parliament and of Mr. Namah behavior. The following statements sum up the opinion of many:

Belden Namah with his actions when storming the courthouse and attempting to arrest the Chief Justice must make every citizen think twice. Is it a preview of what is to come? (Post Courier June 7 p13)

The action of Mr. Namah and his entourage is unacceptable as it has destroyed the credibility of the judiciary of this country (Mr Gamato, Morobe Provincial Administrator, quoted by Post Courier June 5 page 13)

On Sunday 22d at 3:30am after the 27<sup>th</sup> elimination. Namah was declared winner by the returning officer with the score of 7390 votes. He then signed the writ on Sunday at 10:40 at the Vanimo grand-stand oval before returning officer Peter Solo. He did not join O'Neill's camp, located in Alotau but he established his own camp in Kokopo, East New Britain. His party, however, did not do well in the elections and did not enter into the negotiations held in Alotau in view of forming the new majority and government.

In the Inaugural Sitting of the 9<sup>th</sup> Parliament, on Friday August 3d, Namah entered the House with the 17 members of the Kokopo Camp. They nominated Francis Marus for the position of Parliament Speaker. The O'Neill faction nominated the MP Member of Finschhafen Theo Zurenuoc, who was elected by secret ballot with 88 votes against 17. Then followed the election of the Prime Minister. Mr O'Neill mustered 94 votes against 12. Namah stood with only 11 MPs, since five of this group had crossed the floor and voted for O'Neill. Following other party leaders, Namah too gave a speech in which he congratulated the new elected speaker and Prime Minister. He even apologised for his past behaviour:

I want to say sorry to the people of this country. If anything I have done as the Deputy Prime Minister in the then O'Neill-Namah government, I apologise. I want too on this floor of Parliament apologise to the Chief Justice of this country." (Post Courier Tuesday August 7<sup>th</sup>)  
He then concluded by saying that his team will provide a vibrant opposition.

When the Parliament reconvened on August 23d Namah was absent, arising a lot of speculation in regard to his health and political future. Some days later he started issuing long statements in the newspapers, where appeared also his picture together with the other 13 members of the opposition.

happened in the last fifteen years or so. Legislators are now executors, Governors are now also members of Parliament and members of parliament detain executive power in their respective districts.

The consequences of this fact are various and mostly negative. By rendering the position of the parliament members so appetible, the system is causing increasing competition among candidates  
As the same Frank Kolman wrote:

To become a parliamentarian today means to be involved in the distribution of the increased revenue into this country in the next few years. This is what is causing all the sitting MPs to fight with tooth, nail, lies, and sometimes even with guns in order to remain in power. And that is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow that the 3,400 candidates, who have spent so much of their earning or borrowing in their campaigns, want to acquire. (Frank Kolman in The National, June 22 2012 page 19.)

As already suggested the competition could bring some losing candidates to financial bankrupt  
The competition among candidates is multiplied by the competitions among their supporters who might recur to all means in order to get them win.

Another consequence the fight after the elections

Another consequence is the discrimination in the distribution of services and money.

"Let me say today that I will only represent the people of Bewani, Wutung and Oney who voted for me. Without you I would not be elected for the second time. People from Green River, Amanab and Imonda will suffer for five years". (National 24 July)

Any MP who loses at the polls this year would have to be the most incompetent or a thief who has kept all the money these past five years to himself.