

## Education In Trouble

Papua New Guinea sits atop one of the world's most fabulous mineral wealth but its inability to educate its citizens could well leave those resources undeveloped. Blasius Coki of IPS reports.

**P**ORT Moresby—Most Third World countries would probably envy Papua New Guinea (PNG) its rich deposits of gold, oil, copper, petroleum and other valuable minerals.

But for all its wealth, PNG is having a hard time giving its children an education, raising serious doubts about the country's preparedness to successfully develop its abundant resources.

Total enrolment is 467,000 students, which is less than one-half the population of school age. At the same time, PNG has an illiteracy rate of 65 per cent in a population of 3.5 million, the highest in the Asia-Pacific region.

Not only is education not compulsory or universally available, but the country's extremely limited facilities are completely beyond the reach of the vast majority of the people.

PNG Prime Minister Rabbie Namaliu declared recently that "universal education or free education at both the secondary and other levels would not be achieved in the next 10 years."

Unlike other countries, PNG is not in a position yet to regard education as a privilege, right or opportunity, Namaliu said.

So while the country's constitution does provide the right of every Papua New Guinean to education, that right remains a distant dream—15 years after independence.

Not only has the education system failed to fulfil that constitutional mandate, but it remains essentially a service for the privileged few and the rich.

This concern was highlighted last month in the public outcry over the selection of a few privileged Grade 10 students who will enter one of the nation's high schools in February.

There are far more qualified students than available space in PNG schools. The prospects for those not fortunate enough to be selected are bleak, with limited job opportunities and avenues for further training.

This year, more than 12,000 students sat for the Grade 10 examinations, but only 3,000 have been awarded a place in secondary institutions.

But if space is a problem, the high cost of education is an equally staggering burden to most PNG families.

Fees are charged at all levels in the education system, from elementary to tertiary, and these keep on increasing every year.

When the new school year begins this month, for example, parents of those children privileged enough to obtain a place in a secondary school will have to pay significantly higher fees—some 20 to 30 per cent more—for their children's education.

School fees in the international schools, which are attracting more and more Papua New Guineans because of their quality and the severe limitations of the national school system, can go as high as US\$4,900.

But the problems facing education in PNG are by no means confined to the availability of space and money. The quality of education itself and its relevance to this emerging, developing society also needs to be seriously tackled.

"At present, there is nothing in our primary or secondary education system for preparing our children for the challenges presented by the rapid development of our mineral resources," lamented the prime minister.

Similar fears have been voiced by the PNG Chamber of Mines and Petroleum. Greg Anderson, the chamber's executive officer, said the lack of qualified nationals "has thrown an increasing burden on employers who have to make up for the shortfalls."

For now, the government is placing top priority on a major literacy drive. But it has to contend with formidable obstacles of terrain, lack of trained personnel and inadequate funds.

Papua New Guinea has some 860 different languages and education experts see this as a major obstacle to promoting universal literacy.

Education Secretary Jerry Tetaga summed up the 1990 school year as "a bad one for Papua New Guinea". He said problems caused by the Bougainville crisis were compounded by those of law and order, unrest at the schools, tribal fighting, vandalism, rape cases and poor student discipline, among others.

The political crisis in the island of Bougainville has resulted not only in the closure of PNG's most profitable copper mines, it has prevented some 23,500 students from attending school.

The government's 1991 budget allocates 50 million kina (about US\$52 million) of its US\$1.35 billion budget for educational development. The figure may appear impressive, but with the complex problems involved, it may be far from adequate.