

Panguna Mine: Increase in litigants, as 4,500 Bougainville residents demand justice from Rio Tinto

Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, 18 July 2024:

An additional 1,500 residents of Bougainville, an island of Papua New Guinea, have joined the class action lawsuit against Rio Tinto and Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL). This represents a 50 per cent increase since the filing of the legal action in May 2024.

Over 4,500 claimants are now seeking compensation, expected to be in the billions of dollars, for historical mismanagement of the Panguna Copper Mine, which caused large scale environmental and social harm.

Martin Miriori, the lead claimant of the class action suit and Paramount Chief of the Basikang Taingku clan, said: “The large increase in claimants demonstrates the strength of feeling among local people that Rio Tinto and BCL must make amends for decades of environmental devastation. This issue will not go away, as the legal action has attracted strong support, and reminded the world of the destruction caused by the mine operator’s reckless actions.”

In another development, lawyers representing the claimants have confirmed the first court hearing will take place in Port Moresby on 10 October 2024.

Matthew Mennilli, a partner at the Sydney-based law firm Morris Mennilli who is representing the class together with the Port Moresby-based firm Goodwin Bidar Nutley Lawyers, said: “Since the investigation into this claim began three years ago, we have spent significant time meeting with local residents in the affected region, engaging with scientific experts across various disciplines and undertaking the necessary preparatory steps to commence the class action. We are committed to advancing the action against Rio Tinto and BCL on behalf of the class and, through the conduct of the proceedings, we hope to empower claimants after their voices were unheard and ignored for so many years.”

The Panguna Mine ceased operations in 1989 when related disputes spiralled into a civil war lasting for ten years. Neither Rio Tinto nor BCL ever undertook, nor have they committed to undertaking, any form of environmental or social impacts remediation.

The class action is made up of a majority of villagers in the affected region of Bougainville and has the confirmed support of 71 local clan leaders.

The class action seeks compensation for the i) environmental damage caused to the area and ii) loss and damage suffered by the villagers living in the affected region.

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Media enquiries

Edward Lee

elee@sfassociates.ltd

+44 7736 220 565

Neil Cameron

ncameron@sfassociates.ltd

+44 7786 384017

Notes to Editors

1. Details of the claim and associated materials including images and videos of the affected lands and peoples can be found at: <https://www.pangunamineaction.com>
2. Solicitors for the plaintiff and class members are Goodwin Bidar Nutley Lawyers, of Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, and Morris Mennilli, of Sydney, Australia.
3. Bougainville Copper Limited (as it is now known) (“BCL”) operated the Panguna Copper Mine (“Panguna Mine”) between 1971 and 1989, during which period Rio Tinto was the controlling shareholder in BCL. Operations at Panguna Mine saw the disposal of tailings and other waste products often directly into the Jaba-Kawerong river system and associated valleys, at huge scale for many years. During production, approximately 90,000 to 120,000 tonnes of waste rock and approximately 80,000 to 140,000 tonnes of tailings were produced by the Panguna Mine each day.
4. Panguna Mine, Google Maps ref: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/QEckPeHj1byYgcCb8>