



PRESS RELEASE

Banabans to restore homeland

Elders to return from 65 year exile

The BANABANS living in exile for the past 65 years on Rabi Island in Fiji are inviting the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Japan to work with them to rehabilitate their homeland of Banaba, known in colonial times as Ocean Island.

Over 90 percent of Banaba is uninhabitable because of rapacious mining by the British Phosphate Commission, a government entity. Estimates of the damage to the island exceed one billion Australian dollars.

According to the Chairman of the Rabi Council of Leaders, Dr Paulo Vanualailai:

"The Banaban elders want to fix the damage done to their island and dream of returning home to oversee this project."

"We are serious about this and want to start work by the end of this year," he said.

A feasibility study is underway and a team will conduct a field study within the next few months.



Banaba's mined out fields 1968



How Banaba has been left today

A leading Banaban elder, Mr Tekoti Rotan, said that the elders are not worried about the perilous and long sea voyage, the lack of medical facilities and housing and the frequent water and food shortages on Banaba.

"We want to die on our homeland as it is where our ancestors were born", stated Mr Rotan

The Banabans have been on Rabi since 1945.

During World War II, the Japanese forces relocated the Banabans to labour camps around the Pacific.



"After the War, the British told them that they could not go home as their villages had been destroyed and they were relocated by the British to Rabi where most Banabans live today" the Chairman said.

Many Banabans believe that the British lied to them so that the BPC could go about its business unhindered by the opposition of the landowners.

The Banabans believe it is time to look forward to the future generations.

"We want to let the world know we are standing up on our two feet and going back to rehabilitate our island and these countries - Australia, New Zealand, England, Japan – have the capacity to help us.

"We are not asking for more than what is fair."

At the conclusion of a long UK court case in 1979, the Banabans were awarded a modest AUD10 million in compensation from the UK Government.

Many Banabans are angry at their past treatment and want to take these powers back to court to seek just compensation. However, according to the Chairman:

"The past is gone and now it is time to look to the future. The damage has been done. They have taken away our land and we were moved to an alien environment where we originally lost one-third of our population.

"All we are asking is that these governments do what is right and to help us to repair and rebuild our homeland."

The BPC, a consortium formed by the UK, Australian and NZ Governments, used the island as a source of cheap phosphate for farmers in those countries. The Banabans were exploited, paid a pittance for the destruction of their land.

"The farmers prospered at the expense of the Banabans who are now among the poorest people in the Pacific" the Chairman said.

"In spite of assurances to rehabilitate the island, nothing was done by the BPC and nothing has since been done by these governments to clean up their mess".





Banabans living asbestos ridden buildings

Mining junk left to rot on Banaba

The BPC and the UK Government left the island devastated and littered with garbage. Today, the inhabitants face major health risks from the asbestos placed on the island by the BPC.

"Drinking water is collected from asbestos roofs. The colonial powers put the asbestos there and they have a moral duty to remove it and to compensate for any suffering caused by asbestos exposure."

Rusting mining equipment, plant and fuel tanks are a serious pollution threat to the limited ground water resources of the island.

Dr Vanualailai said the biggest challenge right now was raising enough funds to carry out a project that could take as long as 40 years to complete.

The Banabans have the moral support of both Nauru and Kiribati.

"We have discussed our plans with the Kiribati government and they are very supportive," he said.

"The Nauru Rehabilitation Corporation is also offering to help us."

According to the Chairman, the rehabilitation of Banaba is a project of major cultural significance.

"The young Banabans are moving away from the community in search of opportunities not available on Rabi"

"Unless the island is restored, we will lose our cultural identity. The Chairman stated."

Part of the project will involve exporting limestone, a material that is very suitable for coastal protection structures needed to protect many islands in Kiribati from sea level rise.

"This pinnacle rock is an environmental problem on Banaba. It may be an environmental solution for neighbouring islands".