CHAPTER 8

1984: REFUGEES, 'HOLIDAY CAMPS' AND DEATHS

Alan Smith and Kevin Hewison

In 1984 11,000 refugees crossed into Papua New Guinea. In previous years the flow of refugees had remained relatively small and manageable, and the Papua New Guinea government (and the Australian administration before it) had been able to cope. It resettled some within Papua New Guinea, found third countries for a few, and repatriated (or turned back) the majority, probably a pragmatic balancing of Papua New Guinean public opinion and Indonesian pressure (see TAPOL 1984:84-92). The exodus in 1984, however, threatened to destroy the assumptions on which border management policy has been based.

Nowhere has this been more obvious than in the dilemma concerning the treatment of border crossers. Initially the Papua New Guinea government attempted to apply its tried methods, but as the number of crossers grew, so did the difficulties of pursuing such a policy, which stretched the resources of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) to the limit. One of the major assumptions of DFAT policy has been that West Papuan nationalism, as expressed through the OPM, will wither as Irian Jaya becomes more closely integrated into the Indonesian nation. The unprecedented flow of refugees across the border in three major waves in 1984 seems closely related to OPM activity in Irian Jaya and the Indonesian government’s continued attempts to suppress the movement.

First wave - incident in Jayapura

Following the flag-raising incident in Jayapura on 13 February
FIGURE 8.1  The refugee camps
1984 and a series of OPM actions in and around the city the Indonesian authorities began a ‘clean-up’ campaign which radiated out from Jayapura into the nearby countryside. House-to-house searches were conducted in the city and surrounding villages and large numbers of Melanesian soldiers, police, civil servants, teachers, students and their families were reported detained or fleeing the authorities towards Vanimo in Papua New Guinea (*Post-Courier* 21 February 1984; *Niugini Nius* 22 February 1984). Sandaun (West Sepik) provincial secretary, Melchior Kapaith, stated:

The story they [refugees] tell is pretty consistent, that there is fighting in Jayapura between OPM and Indonesian security forces. It seems to be true because they are city people, which is unusual because we usually get village people coming across (*Niugini Nius* 16 February 1984).

The events of February were themselves a response to continued Indonesian action against West Papuan nationalism in all its forms. At the end of 1983 a number of prominent West Papuans, including Arnold Ap, curator of the anthropological museum at Cendrawasih University and director of the Membesak Melanesian folk theatre, were arrested by Indonesian paracommendos in what appeared to be the beginning of a new wave of repression (*TAPOL Bulletin* 61, January-February 1984).

During and after the events of February, it was reported that staff and students of the university were amongst those to flee (*Post-Courier* 20 February, 11 May 1984). The first wave of refugees included many who, like these students, were articulate and politically conscious Melanesian nationalists. Some identified explicitly with OPM and stated that they were in Papua New Guinea temporarily: ‘We came here because if we are killed, the guts of West Papuan hopes will disappear with us’ (*Niugini Nius* 23 February 1984). These refugees were said to have come originally from the towns of the north coast, their association with the OPM being through the Markas Victoria group - the former Biak-based Rumkorem faction (Osborne 1984:8).

Almost all of the refugees who crossed into Papua New Guinea at this time came as a direct result of the events in and around Jayapura. As refugees began to move into Papua New Guinea the government began to apply its standard policies on border crossing. In line with this both the Sandaun provincial government and DFAT attempted to use the border liaison hot-line to contact Jayapura and find out the cause
of the exodus. Jayapura could not be raised by either group nor by the
Indonesian embassy in Port Moresby (*Post-Courier* 16 February
1984). The Papua New Guinea embassy in Jakarta was instructed to
seek an explanation (*Times of Papua New Guinea* 16 February 1984)
but to no avail. Foreign Affairs and Trade minister Rabbie Namaliu
then sent two urgent telexed requests to his counterpart, Mochtar
Kusumaatmadja, asking for clarification (*Post-Courier* 24 February
1984). Jakarta finally sent a reply stating that nothing major had occurred
on their side of the border and that everything was under control.

Apparently satisfied with this belated reply, the Papua New
Guinea government then proceeded to offer limited assistance to the
border crossers. However, prime minister Somare was quick to point
out that the crossers would be dealt with under the provisions of the
1979 Border Agreement as illegal immigrants. Somare stated: ‘They
will be arrested, questioned and a court will decide whether they are
genuine refugees’ (*Niugini Nius* 24 February 1984). Meanwhile, the
makeshift camp holding the crossers soon proved inadequate and the
first hundred or so arrivals in Vanimo assisted the Papua New Guinea
Defence Force to construct a new camp at Blackwater, outside Van-
imo. The costs of running the camp were to be borne by international
agencies - the UNHCR, with assistance from the Red Cross and
Austcare (Mongi *et al.* 1984; *Post-Courier* 29 February 1984).

With the border crossers in their new camp, legal proceedings
began; eighty men were charged with illegal entry by the police in Van-
imo, apparently acting on directions from Port Moresby. The men
appeared in Vanimo District Court on 27 February and pleaded guilty
but their case was adjourned for a week by the presiding magistrate
pending instructions from Port Moresby. Before the case appeared
again, legal aid was arranged through the public solicitor on request
from one of those charged (*Niugini Nius* 1 March 1984). When the case
came up again, defence counsel from the Public Solicitor’s Office chal-
 lenged the legality of the government’s direction to the police to charge
the crossers. He also sought to change the ‘guilty’ plea to ‘not guilty’.
After a further two weeks’ adjournment the case was heard against an
expanded list of 111 refugees. The constitutional issue was resolved
when the police prosecutor claimed he had mistaken National Security
Council direction (permissible) for National Executive Council
(cabinet) direction (non-permissible). The change of plea was rejected
by magistrate Salatiel Lenalia who had handled the case to date and he
convicted 84 of the men, with 73 of them being gaol ed for six weeks. A
second magistrate dismissed the same charge against the other 27 (Post-Courier, Niugini Nius 22 March 1984).

The fate of those convicted was not immediately clear, but Namaliu stated that under normal circumstances illegal crossers were to be dealt with by the police (Post-Courier 22 March 1984). Nor was it clear what the implications of a not guilty verdict were. While Namaliu had referred to the possibility of permissive residence for some and to the need for Indonesian assurances of safety for returnees, there was also concern in some quarters that a repatriation exercise would begin. For example, UNHCR representative Michael Shergold suggested that his office should be involved in the assessment of refugee status (Post-Courier, Niugini Nius 22 March 1984). Before any repatriation could have commenced, however, an appeal was lodged against the conviction and those who had been gaolied were released on bail (Post-Courier 30 March 1984). When the National Court finally convened in Vanimo in mid June, Deputy chief justice Mari Kapi quashed the District Court convictions (Niugini Nius 22 June 1984).

Between the first and second hearings of the Vanimo case, a special border liaison meeting took place in Jayapura at the request of the Papua New Guinea government, with refugees being the principal topic (Niugini Nius 15 March 1984). At this meeting, the first since the February events, a stalemate emerged that was to continue for most of the year: the Indonesians sought information on the border crossers which Papua New Guinea was reluctant or unable to provide; Papua New Guinea sought satisfactory guarantees of the safety of returnees which the Indonesian government would not give (Post-Courier, Niugini Nius 19, 20, 21 March 1984).

**Second wave - Jayapura hinterland**

By March 1984 it was reported that there were about 320 crossers in Sandaun Province, and even though there were reports of groups of refugees heading for Papua New Guinea the problem for the Papua New Guinea government remained at a manageable level (Post-Courier 26 March 1984). However, it was soon to become clear that the incident in Jayapura was not planned as a single event but rather as part of a general uprising (interview, Tom Tereuw, Vanimo, 29 December 1984). It is not clear how widespread or coordinated these gestures of defiance were, but Indonesian military activity certainly fanned out from Jayapura and moved inland to the south and east
down the border (Post-Courier 26 March 1984).

The second wave of refugees moving into Papua New Guinea came from this corner of Irian Jaya as a result of search and pursuit operations carried out by the Indonesian military, and possibly also because of clashes between these troops and the OPM, fear of possible clashes, Indonesian harassment, or because OPM warned people that they should escape while they had the chance. It should be remembered that this area is close to Jayapura where official and unofficial transmigration has caused considerable dislocation amongst Melanesians, and that it is an area which has a long association with OPM. Most recently, it has been the base area of regional commander James Nyaro.

On 26 March it was reported that, almost a week earlier, more than one hundred people had fled into Papua New Guinea to escape clashes between OPM and Indonesian troops in and around Waris, about 20 kilometres from the border. From the villages of Woro and Kwana, these refugees were the first reported from the inland (Post-Courier, Niugini Nius 26 March 1984). The movement of this relatively small group of refugees across the border signalled the beginning of a rapid increase in the number of refugees entering Papua New Guinea.

OPM actions at Waris were followed by a raid at Ubrub (Niugini Nius 28 March 1984), and by OPM’s 26 March capture of Swiss pilot Werner Wyder, an Indonesian army officer and a doctor (both assassinated) and a Melanesian teacher at the border station of Yuruf (Post-Courier 2 April 1984) (see chapter 5). The Indonesian government’s response to these events included ground sweeps by troops, apparently supported by helicopters and jet fighters, two of which flew into Papua New Guinea territory near Green River (Post-Courier, Niugini Nius 28 March 1984), setting off a long series of diplomatic exchanges between the two governments.

As these events unfolded, the trickle of refugees across the border into Sandaun Province became a flood. By 7 April refugees were said to be congregating around the Catholic mission at Kamberatoro and Mamamura village, but it was reported that border officials had now been instructed to send the refugees back to their villages and not to give any help. The report quoted government officials as saying there was no money for help and the government did not want to ask for assistance from the UNHCR because it insisted that these people were not refugees. Niugini Nius claims to have been told at the border that since 26 March Indonesian troops had been dropped almost daily from
helicopters and were advancing towards the border and that there had been heavy fighting between Yuruf and Amgotoro (Niugini Nius 8 April 1984). By 12 April it was reported that as many as 3,000 Irian Jayan border crossers were either in or headed for Papua New Guinea, including 437 already in Vanimo, 320 at Kamberatoro and another 300 heading there, about 1,000 heading for Green River from Ubrub, and hundreds from the Waris and Arso areas heading for Imonda and Bewani (Post-Courier 12 April 1984). The bulk of the new crossers were inland village people, and many were joining relatives on the Papua New Guinea side. The bishop of Vanimo, John Etheridge, became involved, warning of the danger of food shortages and taking full responsibility for feeding and clothing refugees at Kamberatoro (Niugini Nius 24 April 1984). But the involvement of the church was not, according to Etheridge, without its critics (interview, Vanimo, 29 December 1984).

Third wave - focus on the south

The third wave of refugees, again mainly villagers, crossed into Western Province along a 150 kilometre stretch of the border from about the northern end of the Fly River bulge to the mountains where Western Province meets Sandaun. The first report of the southern boundary crossers was of twenty-eight people from Sota village on the border who sought refuge on 9 April. It was reported that the village had connections with OPM, and following the arrest of two of their leaders all of the remaining villagers had fled (Niugini Nius 12 April 1984). But this was just the beginning, and by 1 May some 2,500 refugees had arrived in the area north of Kiunga near the small town of Ningerum (Post-Courier 1 May 1984). Already, this new exodus dwarfed that into Sandaun Province.

The border crossers in the Western Province camps are people from two tribal groups - the Yonggom (or Muyu as they are known on the other side) and the Ningerum. Many have been in Papua New Guinea before, and on crossing joined their wantoks (members of the same language group, kin). Indeed, many are people recognized by the 1984 border agreement as ‘traditional’ crossers, having sago stands and vegetable gardens on the Papua New Guinea side of the border. However this agreement does not allow for crossing the border for resettlement. According to missionaries of long experience in the Kiunga area, for many years there has been a certain amount of popu-
lation drift across the quite artificial border. The drift was to the west into Dutch New Guinea during the 1950s and early 1960s, when Dutch mission activity attracted people; more recently it has been to the east, with the Yonggom tending to displace the neighbouring Awin people. The Ok Tedi project, especially the construction of the Kiunga-Tabubil road, seems to have caused a considerable population shift in the whole region (King 1983). This recent influx, however, has involved a large proportion of the Yonggom and Ningerum people from west of the border. According to reports in the camps, much of the tribal land has been depopulated. This was confirmed in a Jakarta press report of a tour by Irian Jayan governor, Isaac Hindom. It was reported that he found that 5,000 of the 8,500 population of the Mindiptanah subdistrict had fled; a further 4,400 of a population of 6,100 had fled Waropko subdistrict. Whole villages were found to be deserted (TAPOL Bulletin 64, 1984).

In most cases the newcomers have arrived amongst people who have traditional obligations to them and have made land available to them to live on and from. This has meant that although the situation may not have been entirely without friction, accommodation, rather than confrontation, has been the norm. Other observers have described the same kind of situation at the inland camps on the northern end of the border at Kamberatoro and Green River. Referring to Kamberatoro, one investigating team found that the 'people from Yurup and Amgotoro are from the same Dera clan as the people of the Kamberatoro area... The Ubrup people here are those who have ties by marriage to the Deras'. At Green River, similarly, they reported 'they are of the same clan as the Papua New Guinea people of the area and so are offered hospitality' (Mongi et al. 1984:5, 7).

Despite Indonesian denials, it is clear that military operations or 'exercises' have been conducted in the northern border region and all of the evidence points to OPM involvement also. For the south, however, news reports of OPM-Indonesian clashes emanate from OPM sources, either from letters released by OPM 'representatives' in Port Moresby or through OPM's southern regional (Merauke) commander Gerardus Thomy (e.g. Niugini Nius 18 May, 13 August 1984). Determining, with any degree of confidence, the causes of the southern exodus is thus a matter of conjecture, but there has been a number of suggestions.

One possibility is that the refugees have spontaneously fled a generalized oppression. This seems unlikely, however, given the sud-
den exodus of thousands of people. A second suggestion is that the people have been displaced by transmigration. While there are plans for transmigration in this area, little, if any, actual settlement has taken place; transmigration could be seen by the people only as a future threat. The third possibility is in two variant forms, but centres on the assertion that OPM has forced the people to leave their traditional land. One variant suggests that OPM might have cleared a fighting zone and thus moved the population to safer areas. The other, supported by both Indonesian and Papua New Guinea officials, is that OPM has intimidated the people and forced them into Papua New Guinea in order to gain international publicity. The fourth possibility is that there have been armed clashes between OPM and Indonesian forces. In determining the veracity of these possibilities, the accounts of the refugees are significant.

In the Western Province camps the refugees appear well organized and disciplined, especially as they have tended to remain in village groups, with lines of communication through camp and village leaders and spokesmen. During the course of interviews two themes kept emerging, the first almost legendary in form. It was an account of the frustration of the West Papuan people and the denial of their aspirations for independence; it referred to their land having been stolen from them by the Indonesian people, who are different from them and have no right to Melanesian land. It spoke of oppression by Indonesia in the form of rough justice being handed out to any West Papuans who revealed their nationalist feelings. Transmigration was spoken of only in the sense of a component of cultural threat (interviews, Kiunga, 9 September 1984). OPM did not figure prominently. Rather the people spoke powerfully and emotionally of their West Papua and their independence. They clearly believe in the possibility of independence and say they will not return until they gain independence, with some claiming they will fight for it.

The second recurring theme concerned ‘incidents’, clashes, reprisals and threats. The refugees referred specifically to an incident at Waropko near the town of Mindiptanah on 10 April when it appears there was a raising of the West Papuan flag. The incidents surrounding this event are said to have led (by one account) to a threat that the army would wipe out the people if there was another incident. A variant claim was that the threat was relayed by ‘our leaders’. There were references to church desecrations and the destruction of houses and gardens (interview, Kiunga, 9 September 1984).
These refugee accounts appear to be roughly in line with that provided by the OPM of clashes beginning in mid April and continuing through to July, and of Indonesian reprisals. Investigating teams from the Catholic church, while reluctant to accept all OPM stories of atrocities, reprisals and clashes, claim to have enough corroborating evidence to suggest that a church in Ninati, near Mindiptionanah, was sacked by Indonesian troops (interview, Bishop Deschamps, Kiunga, 9 September 1984), and to at least take seriously the broad outline of the OPM claims of clashes (interview, Father Basil Peutalo, Port Moresby, 17 October 1984).

The reported flow of refugees across the border also tends to coincide with the claimed armed clashes. While refugees continued to cross in the north (Post-Courier 27 April 1984), the first reports of southern crossers, as noted above, was on 9 April. However, by the end of April it was reported that more than 1,000 people from four villages in Irjan Jaya had crossed into Western Province a week earlier. The refugees claimed that their villages had been occupied by Indonesian soldiers and it was said that they were short of food in bush camps (Niugini Nius 30 April 1984). The following day it was reported that 2,660 people had crossed into Western Province in the previous week and were camped at Komopkin and Benlim [sic.] (Post-Courier 1 May 1984). By mid May it was estimated that there were 5,000 refugees in Papua New Guinea, with 3,800 in Western Province (Niugini Nius 16 May 1984). The numbers continued to rise over the next few weeks with a joint churches team reporting 10,000 refugees by the end of July, including 6,800 in Western Province. The discovery of three other bush camps, holding about 1,500 people, west of Tabubil and south of Kiunga was reported in September (Niugini Nius 26, 27 September 1984).

_Papua New Guinea government policy on refugees_

As noted above, the Papua New Guinea government’s initial response had been to offer assistance to border crossers but to charge them all as illegal crossers and to prepare to repatriate them. However, as the numbers of crossers dramatically increased, the government’s response was not so clear.

A churches investigating team reported that at the end of July all costs at the Blackwater camp, with about 1,000 people, were continuing to be borne by the UNHCR, Red Cross and Austcare. At Kamberatoro (800-900 refugees) the Catholic mission had provided for the
basic needs of the refugees, the costs being borne by the Diocese of Vanimo. The situation at Green River was not so fortunate. The report stated that supplies were originally provided by the government. However, in times of shortage the Catholic Church was asked by the Officer in Charge for assistance, which it provided. The report went on to observe that ‘the government funds seem to be exhausted and the Catholic Church is prepared to extend its services there as well’ (Mongi et al. 1984:4-8). The wording of the church report allows the government’s position to be seen as benevolently helpless in a situation of emergency beyond its capacity.

In mid May, according to Bishop Etheridge the food situation at Green River was desperate (Post-Courier 15 May 1984). A month later when a further group of 200 refugees was brought to Green River, both the Sandaun provincial government and Bishop Etheridge warned that neither the government nor any agency was providing for inland border crossers, and it was left to the church to begin a relief operation (Niugini Nius 25, 27 June 1984; Post-Courier 28 June 1984).

Following its visit to the Sandaun camps in July, the church investigating team warned that the condition of refugees at Green River was very poor, despite some outside assistance, especially when compared with those at Kamberatoro who had sufficient, church-supplied rations. They extrapolated from this a serious concern for the refugees in Western Province who ‘had not been given any assistance’ (Mongi et al. 1984:9). The investigating team had every reason for concern, for it was soon discovered that people were dying of starvation and starvation-related diseases in the Komopkin camp.

Initially, fifty-four deaths were reported, but the toll was up to ninety-two before an adequate relief programme was organized, and following charges of ‘criminal neglect’ by the opposition member for North Fly, Warren Dutton, (Niugini Nius 13 August 1984) the government attempted to explain the situation. Provincial Affairs minister, John Nilkare, told parliament that he accepted responsibility for the deaths, stating:

Obviously there has been some failure by my department that I take full responsibility for. The real responsibility lies with those who persist in telling fanciful stories to people with little knowledge of political reality.

Nilkare went on to accuse OPM of ‘killing their own women and children for the sake of politics’. While admitting that his department had
failed to cope, he claimed that the Irian Jayans were in Papua New Guinea on orders from OPM who must take the blame for the deaths. In other words, the people should not have been in Papua New Guinea in the first place, so those who 'sent' them were at fault. He went on to deny that the government had a policy of starving the border-crossers back into Irian Jaya, stating that the tragedy was not averted because some of his department's officers had failed to correctly interpret the situation and to pass on information to Port Moresby (Post-Courier 17 August 1984).

However, Nilkare's statement failed to convince a number of people, and government backbencher Gabriel Ramoi accused the government of having a starvation policy (Niugini Nius 20 August 1984). As the full story of what happened in the Western Province camps was pieced together, the evidence seemed to confirm Ramoi's claim, in the words of law lecturer Brian Brunton (1984:10) pointing 'more to deliberate design than to a series of serious but not necessarily intentional misjudgements'. It is necessary to look at the events which led to the deaths of ninety-seven refugees in the camps by the end of August (Post-Courier 30 August 1984) in order to examine the contention that deliberate neglect at the highest levels of government amounted to policy.

*The 'holiday camps'*

When the refugees first crossed into Western Province they camped in the bush or near villages or missions, but not in proximity to government stations. Their first contact with officials came when patrols were sent out to the camps to supervise them. Initially, the refugees lived off local sago stands and vegetable gardens, but with numbers swelling these resources were soon exhausted. To offset this, two food supply drops of a week's food each were made by the government in late April and early May, apparently paid for from a payment of K22,800 provided by the Indonesian government (Post-Courier 1 May 1984). However, no further supplies from the government went to the camps until August, and the government would not allow any other relief agencies to become involved (interviews, Kiunga, 9 September 1984; Port Moresby, 13 August 1984).

The period between May and mid August is an important one. On the one hand Foreign Affairs minister Namaliu was taking a strong line on repatriation, demanding that the Indonesian government provide
meaningful guarantees of the safety of any people repatriated. On the other hand, Namaliu’s government and his own department were allowing refugees to starve. This is not the place to examine Namaliu’s initiatives, but it is important to examine what was happening to the refugees, especially in Western Province.

As early as 6 May, one representative of a major international relief agency claims to have expressed concern to DFAT about the camps in the south, and to have offered assistance, but was told ‘at a high level of government’ to keep out (interview, Port Moresby, 13 August 1984). At about the same time, Bishop Deschamps made the first of a number of offers of assistance but was told that he should ‘stand by’ as the government seemed to have control of the situation (Niugini Nius 18 August 1984).

Events during the remainder of May are not at all clear, but there are no reports of supplies reaching the camps although government patrols continued to have a presence in the camps. It seems clear that the government was aware of the situation in the camps at this time, for a report dated 1 June was prepared for Namaliu by Mataio Rabura (acting first assistant secretary for the Border Liaison Branch of DFAT). This report, apparently leaked to Niugini Nius (30 August 1984) by ‘cabinet sources’, pointed out that approaches to the Indonesian authorities for more money had been unsuccessful and added that the crossers would not be fed; the situation was described as ‘critical’. If this was the case, then it should also have been clear to Paulias Matane, secretary of DFAT, who toured the Sandaun and Western Provinces in the last two weeks of May on a ‘public awareness campaign’ designed to identify refugees who would be repatriated. Given that Matane claimed to have identified 5,000 crossers in this category, it can only be assumed that he was aware of the existing conditions in the camps (Niugini Nius 4 June 1984).

In early June the UNHCR sent a formal note to the government requesting that it be given access to the refugees who were now in Papua New Guinea. While the UNHCR had been involved at Blackwater, repeated offers of assistance for the thousands of others had fallen on deaf ears, and this had meant, in journalist Alfred Sasako’s words, ‘thousands of West Irian refugees...have been denied urgently-needed food and medical supplies...’ (Niugini Nius 11 June 1984). Throughout June, while an administrative presence was maintained in the camps, still no supplies were provided, despite offers and expressions of concern about the seriousness of the situation.
On 6 July, for apparently routine reasons, all government officials at the camps in the southern border area were called into Kiunga (Niugini Nius 18 August 1984). Ten days later a new style of administrative presence in the camps was introduced, with two patrols, one north and one south of Kiunga, doing weekly rounds of overnight visits to the various camps then returning to Kiunga for rebriefing. The patrols consisted of a patrol officer, a police officer and a medical officer. It was a show-the-flag operation intended to check on conditions, and to check for new arrivals. But during July conditions deteriorated to the level of disaster.

The official account of how the situation was permitted to deteriorate so badly blames mismanagement, unforeseen difficulties, and a serious breakdown in communications. Nilkare explained:

‘The area is not rich [and there] are continuous difficulties maintaining adequate food supplies for the ordinary population. The medical officers on the regular patrols may have been [so] used to seeing sick people that they did not think it unusual’ (Niugini Nius 18 August 1984).

It is difficult to conceive how the situation could have been considered in any way ‘usual’ if the region is ‘not rich’ and is suddenly burdened with thousands of extra people. Further, when Pastor Roy Woods of the Evangelical Church, and a man of long experience in the area, went to Komopkin on 3 August he reported that he was ‘shocked, really shocked. I could hear crying, crying and crying. The children were just sitting around; they were just too weak to stand or follow us’ (Times of PNG 27 September 1984). Pastor Woods certainly did consider the situation ‘unusual’ and immediately got a helicopter into Komopkin to take out the sickest - seventy trips were reportedly made that day (Niugini Nius 21 August 1984).

It was only Pastor Woods’ report, relayed through local member of parliament Warren Dutton to Port Moresby, which brought any government action, and then, it seems, reluctant action. Earlier patrol reports were ignored. For example, Alfred Sasako (Niugini Nius 21 August 1984) states that he met one officer who spoke of a visit to Niogombo:

I was inside this camp and seven people died right before my eyes. I rushed back and told the provincial police commander in Kiunga and other government officers and all
they said was ‘worry blong ol’ [their problem]. The OPM is causing a lot of headaches so let their people die.

Even when reports of deaths in the camps reached senior Health Department officials, who wanted to rush aid to the area, DFAT remained immovable (Times of PNG 6 September 1984). Only the publicity associated with Woods’ report moved DFAT, with Matane finally inviting the UNHCR representative to visit the Western Province camps. The UNHCR’s visits to the camps resulted in the provision of K725,000 to aid the refugees in September, with a further $435,000 being allocated in December (Niugini Nius 10 September 1984; Post-Courier 12 December 1984). In addition, other non-governmental relief agencies became involved following Woods’ revelations.

The contradiction between the ‘neglect’ of the refugees and concern for their welfare as reflected in prolonged negotiation over the repatriation of so-called illegal border crossers has already been pointed out. They are reconciled only on the basis of a common underlying starting point—a determined refusal to acknowledge the realities of the existence of a refugee problem. The calculated neglect reflects a determination to ‘wish them away’, or ‘ignore them and they’ll go away’. The latter position seems to reflect the position of secretary Matane who saw that ignoring the refugees could also mean applying pressure to force them back across the border and, indeed, to dissuade others from coming across. Even in August, when reports of camp deaths were public, Matane, in briefing a meeting of non-governmental relief agencies (attended by Alan Smith), stressed that the aid provided to border crossers should be minimal, since ‘we don’t want these people coming across for a holiday’.

Given the conditions in the camps, and the deaths, the suggestion that they offered a ‘holiday’ is obscene. More significantly, the suggestion reveals not a ‘miscalculation’ on the part of DFAT or Provincial Affairs but a cold-blooded gamble concerning the motivations and will of the refugees. And even when the bet seemed lost, it was stubbornly maintained.

The publicity associated with the camp deaths continued well into September and brought with it impassioned opposition to the government’s policies and reasoned, yet scathing, criticism of policies (see Brunton 1984). Perhaps in partial response to this criticism, Namaliu surprised many, not the least being the Indonesian government, by
raising Indonesian border violations at the UN General Assembly (Post-Courier 3 October 1984). Mochtar responded by accusing the Papua New Guinea government of interfering in Indonesian domestic affairs, with Namaliu then claiming that Papua New Guinea had a right to ask about events which had caused thousands of Indonesian citizens to flee into Papua New Guinea (Post-Courier 17, 18 October 1984).

Despite these exchanges and criticisms, repatriation remained on the agenda. Proposed visits by Indonesian verification teams brought hostile responses, especially from the Blackwater refugee camp where many of the more articulate refugees were held. Nevertheless, an Indonesian team did arrive to begin assuring the border crossers of their safety upon returning to Irian Jaya (Niugini Nius 2 November 1984). Accompanied by two Papua New Guinea police riot squads, the group visited Green River first, then moved to the Blackwater camp. Despite warnings that the Indonesians would receive a hostile reception, Papua New Guinea officials allowed the Blackwater visit to proceed, arguing that adequate security would be provided (Post-Courier 6 November 1984). However, when the widow of Irian Jaya anthropologist Arnold Ap became involved, accusing the Indonesians of murdering her husband, some refugees attacked and injured several of the Indonesian delegation (Niugini Nius 5 November 1984). In response, there was an official protest to the Papua New Guinea government (Post-Courier 5 November 1984) and a demonstration outside the Papua New Guinea embassy in Jakarta (Niugini Nius 7 November 1984). The Papua New Guinea government was quick to express its regret at the incident and stated that those responsible for the attack would be brought to justice (Niugini Nius 9 November 1984). Perhaps some of the sincerity was taken out of the apology when Papua New Guinea’s police commissioner, David Tasion, stated that his police did not take strong action to prevent the attack at the camp because, ‘We are not like the Indonesians. We won’t shoot people’ (Niugini Nius 9 November 1984). Following this, the Indonesian authorities were reported as saying that repatriation ‘ - if it takes place at all - will...probably be deferred until mid-1985, at the earliest’ (Times of PNG 18 November 1984). Nevertheless, the last weeks of the year were still to prove surprising.

At the end of November it seemed that the influx of refugees was not over, with a further 660 arriving at Kamberatoro and Green River (Niugini Nius 27 November 1984; Post-Courier 28 November 1984). It was also known that there were groups of displaced Irianese living in
the bush along the border, many of whom were, according to Bishop Etheridge, becoming short of food (interview, Vanimo, 29 December 1984). Then, as the UNHCR made more money available for the care of the border crossers, it was announced from Jakarta, where Namaliu was signing the new Border Agreement, that the Indonesian government had finally agreed to the involvement of the UNHCR in repatriation (Post-Courier 13 December 1984).

Despite having achieved this diplomatic victory, Namaliu was removed from his Foreign Affairs and Trade portfolio less than two weeks later. Somare claimed that Namaliu asked to move, but the latter denied this, stating that his work was unfinished. While his new portfolio of Primary Industry is not insignificant, it seems clear that Namaliu was one of the political casualties of the troubled year in DFAT.

If Namaliu’s removal from Foreign Affairs came as something of a surprise, then so did the announcement that about one hundred refugees had been repatriated from the Blackwater camp. The new minister, John Giheno, commented on the repatriation, which apparently was carried out in the early hours of the morning when an Indonesian ship took the refugees from Vanimo to Jayapura where they were reported to have been given a welcoming feast. It appears that those who returned had crossed into Papua New Guinea in the wake of the Wyder kidnapping in March and had been anxious to return (Post-Courier 27 December 1984; Times of PNG 30 December 1984). However, some questions remain about the exercise. First, while both Bishop Etheridge and Blackwater camp spokesman Tom Ireeuw agree that the refugees wanted to return, they claim that they had not been anxious to return through Jayapura (separate interviews, Vanimo, 29 December 1984). More importantly, despite apparent Indonesian agreement that the UNHCR be involved in repatriation, there was no such involvement in this case. Monitoring the safety of the returnees, so much an issue throughout 1984 and pursued strongly by Namaliu, seems to have been forgotten. Papua New Guinea officials accompanied the refugees to Jayapura, but returned almost immediately with no effort being made to monitor their fate.

The border remains the crucial issue in Papua New Guinea-Indonesian relations, and never before has it seen so many refugees cross to Papua New Guinea. The refugees are still in their camps dotted along the border and while they are there they continue to be a source of aggravation in the relationship between the two countries.
The Papua New Guinea government remains hypersensitive about the border and refugees, having taken action against a number of journalists who have commented on the situation (Osborne 1985). The future of the refugees is no more certain in late 1985 than it was in early 1984, although recent reports do suggest that small numbers of them are seeking asylum in third countries, particularly the Netherlands and Australia (Osborne 1985).

What is certain, however, is that the problem will remain, and, as was so clearly demonstrated in 1984, Papua New Guinea’s policy towards refugees or, as the government prefers, ‘border crossers’, has not been able to cope with large numbers. Nowhere was this more tragically demonstrated than in the deaths in the Western Province camps. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, facing its first real crisis since independence, has appeared split within itself and has followed no consistent line on the treatment of border crossers.

1984 has shown that many thousands of the border crossers have genuine reasons for leaving their side of the border, but the Papua New Guinea government’s apparent refusal to acknowledge this seriously limits its options in dealing with the problem. While the government may well feel that the interests of a few border crossers must be sacrificed in the security interests of Papua New Guinea, the events of 1984 do not suggest that the former necessarily achieves the latter.