

BOUGAINVILLE VOTES TO BECOME WORLD'S NEWEST COUNTRY

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Voters backing Bougainville's independence from Papua New Guinea have won a landslide referendum victory, according to results released on Wednesday — a major step toward the troubled isles becoming the world's newest nation.

Chairman of the Bougainville Referendum Commission Bertie Ahern declared that 1,76,928 people — around 98% of voters — had backed independence with just 3,043 supporting the option of remaining part of Papua New Guinea with more autonomy.

The announcement prompted loud cheers, applause and tears as dignitaries soon burst into song, with strains of the islands' anthem "My Bougainville" ringing out. "Happy is an understatement," said nursing graduate Alexia Baria.

The historic vote caps a decades-long peace process and a long recovery from a brutal civil war between Bougainville rebels, Papua New Guinea security forces and foreign mercenaries that ended in 1998 and left up to 20,000 people dead — 10% of the population.

"Now, at least psychologically, we feel liberated," said John Momis, the priest-turned-leader of the autonomous region's government.

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