

**Extract from**  
**In the Best Interests**  
**Intrigue and Payback in Papua New Guinea**

**by John and Elisa Mendzela**

**(from Chapter 35)**

We returned our attention to the drama on the sports field. The commander ended his discussion with Father Luke and the staff. Standing on one of the police vehicles, he addressed the students through his megaphone. They listened, defiantly. So did we, anxiously.

‘I have spoken to your principal. He has asked me to protect college property from further damage. I have here a list of the leaders of these troubles.’ He read out 11 names. ‘I want those students to report to me here for questioning, right now. Otherwise, I will arrest you all.’

There was no reaction from the students. After a minute or so, the commander spoke again. ‘I will allow you one hour. If the students on this list have not reported to me by then, I will arrest you all. In the meantime, none of you will leave here. And you will have no contact with college staff or anyone else.’

The commander retreated inside his vehicle. When Father Luke and staff members tried to approach him, police turned them away. Townsend was nowhere to be seen. Nor was deputy Isobel.

The police cordon pulled back a little but stayed intact. We could hear voices rise and fall as the students talked urgently amongst themselves. Time was racing by. What would happen?

I knew we had to stay out of sight. But we could still do something. ‘June, start calling people. Everyone you can think of — PNG media, our embassies, BBC World Service, ABC News in Australia. Tell them lives are at stake. Get as much publicity as you can. That’s the best way to protect the students.’ June got busy on the phone with vivid eyewitness accounts of the situation.

The allotted hour expired. The students fell silent as the police commander climbed on his vehicle and resumed his megaphone. He spoke confidently. ‘The leaders I named must report to me now please. Then my officers will release the rest of you.’

The students didn’t move and didn’t speak. The police commander, looking surprised, waited a few moments. Then he tried once more. ‘This is your last chance to avoid arrest. Anyone who points out those leaders to me will be free to go.’

The students remained still and silent. Thwarted, the commander issued orders we couldn’t hear. The police opened one side of their ring, nearest the main access road, and converted their elliptical cordon into something more like a long rectangle. Within minutes, over 300 students, flanked by police, were walking in column down the access road towards the highway. Father Luke and some staff walked along too, outside the guards. The procession passed within 20 metres of us as we kept out of sight. All the police vehicles drove away down the back road a few minutes later. What had been a crowded sports field was now deserted.