

# PM opposes Kokoda Track mine

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**JOHN Howard has moved to scupper plans by an Australian company to mine gold along the Kokoda Track, where more than 600 Australian soldiers lost their lives in some of the fiercest fighting of World War II.**

In a development likely to spark tensions between Canberra and Port Moresby, the Prime Minister is determined that the proposal by Gold Coast-based Frontier Resources is scrapped.

Mr Howard is prepared to tell his PNG counterpart, Michael Somare, that Australia will not accept large-scale mining on the track, where thousands of Australian trekkers make an annual pilgrimage.

But Frontier yesterday warned against "foreign government intervention" over a gold deposit, worth an estimated \$1.3 billion at current prices, it has unearthed in the Mount Bini area, northeast of Port Moresby.

The 96km Kokoda Track passes right through Frontier's 540sqkm Kodu exploration area, which is also estimated to contain almost \$400 million worth of copper.

Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway chairman and former RSL NSW president Rusty Priest said the sanctity of the Kokoda Track should be preserved.

"Australians appreciate the sacrifices made during the Kokoda campaign and we don't want to see that area ripped up for a goldmine," Mr Priest said.

Mr Howard dispatched a high-level delegation headed by Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet first assistant secretary Hugh Borrowman to PNG to inspect the proposed mining area this week.

Members of the delegation, which returned to Canberra last night, included Australian War Graves director Major General Paul Stevens, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Pacific division head David Binns and Department of Environment and Heritage assistant secretary Greg Terrill.

The visit comes as Australian war veterans - to be headed by Mr Howard's factional ally in the NSW Liberal Party, MP Charlie Lynn - prepare to launch a campaign against the mine.

Mr Lynn, a Right faction powerbroker, is the founding chairman of the Kokoda Track Foundation and owner of Adventure Kokoda, which organises trekking tours of the track.

The Kokoda Track took a heavy toll on both Australia and Japan. More than 600 Australian soldiers' lives were lost and more than 1000 were wounded.

By the time the last enemy bastions at the end of the overland route fell on January 22, 1943, the lives of more than 12,500 Japanese had been lost.

Mr Lynn said yesterday that the Prime Minister had asked the delegation to explore options to protect the environmental integrity of the track.

He said he was disturbed that an Australian company planned to mine the area.

He had seen exploration tags recently pegged along the track and exploration work was clearly visible.

"We are talking about a national icon and if we as Australians allow anyone to desecrate that, we will never be forgiven," Mr Lynn said.

He said the mine risked undermining a thriving trek-based ecotourism industry.

"When trekking started in the early 1990s, all the villages along the track had a combined income of \$3000 a year," he said.

"These days, one village earns that much in a month."

But Frontier manager Peter McNeil said Mr Lynn had a conflict because of his involvement in the trekking business.

Mr McNeil said he had been consulted by Mr Howard's delegation and did not believe Canberra should intervene.

"It would not be right for a foreign government to try to impose its will on Papua New Guinea," he said.

He said the mine would have minimum visual impact on the track and had been welcomed by villagers, who believed the only locals who benefited from trekking were a handful who owned hostels along the track.

"They see it as the main chance to get development in the area," he said.

"These are people who have to walk four hours to get first aid and who have a one-room shack as a school."

Frontier ran into trouble with the stock exchange in July after shares rose 300 per cent on the basis of a controversial resource calculation announcement.

It had repackaged two old releases into a bullish announcement that cited billions of dollars of in-ground copper based on "hypothetical reserves".

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