

The International Federation of Journalists has called for an investigation into the shooting of two media workers during a tour of a power station.¹ It is unclear who the shooters were. The availability of illegal weapons in PNG is a contributing factor to the lethality of conflicts in the country, such as tribal violence in the Highlands. Tribal violence over the PNG election for example, has caused dozens of deaths, including children, and displacement of whole villages.² In parts of Enga Province, modern weapons have replaced non-deadly weapons formerly used in tribal disputes, and rules about the protection of women and children are no longer respected. Defence personnel have been deployed to the region to keep the peace though police say parts of the region are considered ‘no-go zones’.³ The situation is complicated by new aspects of politics and money, corruption such as bribery and fraud; guns are valuable leading to theft, smuggling and more violence. Meanwhile those locals who fled during and after the election related violence are fearful of returning.

The illegal arms trade is a transnational problem in Melanesia and a priority issue for regional security. Combined with local conflicts, scarcity of resources, and displacement of large numbers of people, it poses a serious risk to peace and stability in PNG. A bilateral security agreement between Australia and PNG, whose finalisation was delayed in June, is intended to improve cooperation on a range of security issues, with plans for training, joint exercises, and information sharing on strategic threats.⁴

The impact on women and girls is significant. There are reports that gangs have kidnapped women and children, held them in buildings such as churches, and raped and beaten them.⁵ The hostages were released after the perpetrators received a ransom payment. While police and defence personnel are investigating, the difficult terrain, large remote distances and limited roads and communication, mean that it is difficult to bring perpetrators to justice. One man allegedly involved was arrested in early August.⁶ Amendments to the Criminal Code Act 1974 to enhance response to ‘domestic terrorism’ are being considered by the PNG government to allow for police to respond more quickly.⁷ Other forms of violence against women, such as sorcery accusation related violence, continue to be rife in PNG. Advocates say the violence against women accused of sorcery has worsened in the past 10-15 years, associated with poorer health and social services, and the desire to assign ‘blame’ for sudden deaths or disease in the community or other difficulties such as a financial loss.⁸

Tribal violence and attacks appear to be getting more common and more brutal, and may be considered “repeated patterns of behaviour”.⁹ The nature of intergroup fighting is “systemic and cyclical”, with scholars at the Australian National University calling for better planning around timing of interventions and engagement with networks in local communities (eg, clan leaders, pastors, youth and women leaders).¹⁰ In light of this analysis and increasing reports and evidence, consideration should be given to whether these incidents form part of a systematic and widespread pattern of events which could amount to crimes against humanity. In addition, preventive actions need to be identified and implemented, in consultation with local communities, before violence escalates.

In late July, tribal clashes became so severe that a daily curfew was declared, and extra security sent to the area to mitigate risks of arson, looting and other violence.¹¹ Travel to Enga province was restricted. This combined with broader travel problems as PNG declared a national emergency due to a shortage of fuel supply, due to an ongoing dispute between the main fuel supplier Puma Energy and PNG’s central bank.¹² Fuel rationing and potential effects on movement and transport are a concern, though negotiations are occurring to resolve the conflict.

There is a risk of violence around the reopening of the Porgera Gold Mine in September 2023. Previous fighting has led to closure of schools and businesses in the area, and leaders have appealed for an end to the conflict.¹³

Recommendations

The government of Papua New Guinea should:

1. Develop, in consultation with local communities and leaders, a preventive strategy to tackle intergroup violence;
2. Prioritise action to halt the trade in illegal weapons;
3. Ensure sufficient security personnel in at-risk areas and times of potential escalation;
4. Develop policies and programs to address the rise in sorcery accusation related violence, and the high rates of other forms of violence against women;
5. In addition to the Criminal Code, consider whether other legislative reviews or amendments may be necessary to ensure better accountability for perpetrators of violence;
6. Work towards institutional change within the security sector to better respond to victims of SGBV and other forms of violence, including through training and other capacity building opportunities provided under the security treaty with Australia;
7. Begin working towards fairer and more transparent elections to prevent election-related violence and displacement in future.

International partners should:

1. Provide funding and capacity building to PNG to reform the election process and to equip the security sector to better respond to and prevent escalations in violence;
2. Continue to support strategies for achieving gender equality and a reduction in gender-based violence.

¹ Papua New Guinea: Two media workers shot during power station tour, IFJ, 3 August 2023, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/papua-new-guinea-two-media-workers-shot-during-power-station-tour>

² Natalie Whiting and Hilda Wayne, Tribal fighting over PNG election leaves dozens dead and villages deserted, ABC News, 3 May 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-03/tribal-fighting-png-election-massacre-tole-730/102210514>

³ Ibid

⁴ Tim Swanston, PNG delays bilateral security pact with Australia over sovereignty concerns, ABC News, 1 June 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-01/png-delays-bilateral-security-pact-australia-sovereignty-concern/102423298>

⁵ Tim Swanston and Theckla Gunga, The PNG gang that kidnapped an Australian professor is allegedly unleashing new horrors on girls and women, ABC News, 29 June 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-29/png-gang-that-kidnapped-aussie-unleashes-new-horrors/102495750>

⁶ Christina Persico, Alleged kidnapper of 17 girls in PNG arrested, RNZ, 2 August 2023, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/494993/alleged-kidnapper-of-17-girls-in-png-arrested>

⁷ Tougher Stance on domestic terrorism, The Loop, 3 August 2023, <https://www.looppng.com/png-news/tougher-stance-domestic-terrorism-121924>

⁸ Sarah Kanowski, Dan Smith and Meggie Morris, When Ruth Kissam buried the body of a woman accused of sorcery in PNG, it changed her life, ABC Pacific, 7 July 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/stopping-sorcery-related-violence-in-png/102555722>

⁹ Miranda Forsyth, William Kipongi and Philip Gibbs, How to address escalating violence in PNG, Australian National University, 13 July 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/papua-new-guinea/how-address-escalating-violence-png>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Papua New Guinea: Curfews, flight disruptions affecting Enga Province, as of July 27 due to communal fighting /update 2, Crisis 24, 27 July 2023,
<https://crisis24.garda.com/alerts/2023/07/papua-new-guinea-curfews-flight-disruptions-affecting-enga-province-as-of-july-27-due-to-communal-fighting-update-2>

¹² Tim Swanston, A national emergency has been declared in PNG over the country's fuel supply. What does this mean, and could petrol run out?, ABC News, 3 August 2023,
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-03/why-png-government-is-concerned-about-the-fuel-supply/102678006>

¹³ James Marape appeals to Porgera goldmine communities to 'stop the killings', RNZ, 24 July 2023,
<https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/494350/james-marape-appeals-to-porgera-goldmine-communities-to-stop-the-killings>