

Papua New Guinea Risk: Moderate-High

Tribal violence and payback customs continue to have deadly outcomes in Papua New Guinea, partly due to the widespread availability of guns and other weapons. In August, six hired gunmen were shot by another group in Enga, in what the Prime Minister has called “jungle justice”¹ and “domestic terrorism”.² The bodies of those murdered were left on the road as a warning to others. The government increased security forces and deployed armoured vehicles to the region; it also set up a ‘rapid deployment unit’ to respond to such incidents.³ The government’s authorisation to security forces to use lethal force in their response to such violence has been noted as of concern by Civicus Monitor, which has also reported cases of harassment against human rights defenders especially those dedicated to environmental activism.⁴

Tribal violence continues to present a major threat to civilians, and the risk of massacres and other atrocities is high in the highlands. The other high risk site is the Porgera mine. It is due to reopen by the end of the year, but its sudden closure in 2020 has led to an increase in unemployment and crime, high prices of food, and a lack of services such as health care, and domestic and sexual violence services.⁵ The mining industry in Porgera, with its record of human rights abuses, has been said to have exacerbated existing historical tensions between communities.

In addition to the illegal trade of arms, underlying causes of the tribal violence have been identified, such as weak legal systems and rule of law, and recent disregard of cultural rules, which previously prevented the killing of women, children and the elderly. Human rights defenders have suggested the lack of services to communities, and the breakdown of law and order, along with arms trafficking, have facilitated the increasing violence.⁶

A process to sign a Bilateral Security Treaty between Australia and PNG is continuing.⁷ On 2 November, Australia provided two new light transport aircraft to PNG, for use in accessing PNG’s diverse terrain and help the government to support local communities in remote areas.⁸

A report was presented to PNG Parliament by the Committee on Gender in October, which found during public hearings this year that the already high GBV rates are increasing across the country.⁹ The National Department of Health shared data on requests for healthcare due to violence, noting the overburdened health system and the likelihood this will worsen.¹⁰ The report also highlighted the problem of sorcery accusation related violence which sometimes leads to murder. 29 recommendations were made, including strengthening agencies responsible for gender equality and addressing GBV, better data collection, addressing the under-resourcing of health services and police, supporting civil society organisations to provide support services, improving law and justice responses, and urgently updating and implementing the National Action Plan on sorcery accusation related violence.¹¹

Recommendations

The government of Papua New Guinea should:

- Develop strategies to address the root causes of increasingly fatal tribal violence, which could include preventive action and early warning systems.
- Ensure adequate resources in terms of health and security to protect and assist victims of tribal violence.
- Prioritise action to halt the trade in illegal weapons.

- Consider unintended consequences of “lethal force” orders for police.
- Support human rights and freedoms and ensure that journalists and human rights defenders are able to perform their roles without threat or intimidation.
- Develop strategies for the reopening of the Porgera Mine to prevent future human rights abuses and community conflict.
- Implement the recommendations of the Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment including the urgent updating of the NAP on SARV.
- 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.

International partners should continue to:

- Support strategies for achieving gender equality and a reduction in gender-based violence.
- Support PNG to take proactive measures to prevent the escalation of tribal violence.
- Support security sector reform and capacity building when requested.

¹ PNG’s Marape condemns ‘jungle justice’ after 6 gunmen shot dead, Asia Pacific Report, 22 August 2023, <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2023/08/22/pngs-marape-condemns-jungle-justice-after-6-gunmen-shot-dead/>

² Phil Mercer, Tribal Violence Kills Dozens In Papua New Guinea, VOA News, 23 August 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/tribal-violence-kills-dozens-in-papua-new-guinea/7237502.html>

³ PNG deploys armoured vehicles to Enga in action against ‘domestic terrorism’, Asia Pacific Report, 29 August 2023, <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2023/08/29/png-deploys-armoured-vehicles-to-enga-in-action-against-domestic-terrorism/>

⁴ Civicus Monitor, Papua News Guinea: Attack on Media Workers, Flags taken down while Mining Company Forced to Talk to Communities, 17 October 2023, <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/papua-new-guinea-attack-on-media-workers-flags-taken-down-while-mining-company-forced-to-talk-to-communities/>

⁵ ‘Stop the killings’: PM’s plea to tribes ahead of Porgera mine reopening, ABC News, 24 July 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/programs/pacificbeat/pm-s-plea-to-tribes-ahead-of-porgera-mine-reopening/102638174>

⁶ Bethanie Harriman, Papua New Guinea killings: what’s behind the outbreak in tribal fighting?, The Guardian, 29 August 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/29/papua-new-guinea-killings-whats-behind-the-outbreak-in-tribal-fighting>

⁷ Tim Swanston and Theckla Gunga, PNG and Australia's defence cooperation is a 'jewel' of their relationship – but forming a treaty hasn't been quite so simple, ABC News, 25 September 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-25/australia-png-defence-treaty-negotiations-still-ongoing/102838770>

⁸ The Hon Matt Thistlethwaite MP, Media Release, A new milestone in the defence partnership between Australia and Papua New Guinea, 2 November 2023, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2023-11-02/new-milestone-defence-partnership-between-australia-and-papua-new-guinea>

⁹ Finau Fonua, Violence against women and girls 'increasing' in Papua New Guinea, MP says, RNZ, 14 October 2023, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/499989/violence-against-women-and-girls-increasing-in-papua-new-guinea-mp-says>

¹⁰ Committee on Gender presents report to Parliament, Parliamentary Press Release, 6 October 2023, <https://www.parliament.gov.pg/index.php/news/view/committee-on-gender-presents-report-to-parliament>

¹¹ Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality & Women’s Empowerment, Inquiry into Gender Equality Policies & Institutions, Gender-Based Violence and Sorcery Accusation Related Violence Report to Parliament No.1, October 2023, https://www.unitedforequalitypng.com/_files/ugd/7f0c06_5432484f7cf144d98f1481af4caf3995.pdf?index=true