

### **Papua New Guinea - Moderate**

In July 2019, over 20 people were killed in an episode of retaliatory tribal violence in the Hela province of Papua New Guinea.<sup>i</sup> The victims included children and pregnant women. Longstanding and underlying factors included family conflicts and land disputes, as well as competition over natural resources exacerbated by industry in the area. Although these patterns of violence have existed for some time, little was done by national authorities to prevent escalation. Illegal arms trading and availability of guns has disrupted traditional dispute resolution processes and made them far deadlier. In addition, a lack of police presence in the area has been identified as a contributing factor to the recent outbreak.<sup>ii</sup>

The episode has also highlighted gendered aspects of violence in PNG.

There continue to be extremely high levels of gender based violence in PNG despite its National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence 2016-2025, which is intended as a whole-of-government response including policy, legislative reforms and programs.<sup>iii</sup> It is estimated that two out of three women experience domestic violence, while 90 per cent of women in prison for murder, killed in self-defence.<sup>iv</sup> Further, 2.8 million children, or more than 75 per cent of the child population, experience violent discipline in the home, while children constituted over 50 per cent of the sexual violence cases referred to Médecins Sans Frontières clinics.<sup>v</sup> These extremely high rates of SGBV in PNG can contribute to gender-based atrocity crimes, which was seen for example in the targeting of pregnant women in the July 2019 massacre.

The planned referendum on independence in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville may prove a trigger for further violence in PNG. The 1997 peace agreement between Bougainville and the PNG government requires a referendum to be held on independence before 2020; it has been postponed and is now scheduled for 23 November. A report published by the Lowy Institute in October 2019 predicts a vote overwhelmingly in favour of independence.<sup>vi</sup>

A history of prior conflict can be a risk factor for atrocity crime. More than 10,000 lives were lost in the 10 year conflict beginning in 1988, and a resolution required significant international intervention. Further, the Lowy report notes that ethnic tension, combined with post-colonial grievances and a reluctance by the PNG government to support the referendum process, could inflame tensions further. Limited access to information for the Bougainville population on the vote, and a reliance on social media, could lead to the spread of misinformation leading up to the referendum.

The report also raises concerns about Bougainville's capacity as an independent state, noting that while it is mineral rich, its ability to reach economic self-reliance will require substantial input from the international community. Any resistance by PNG to a pro-independence outcome could lead to violent conflict.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Recommendations**

The government of Papua New Guinea should:

1. Increase the police presence in conflict-affected areas to prevent further violence.
2. Hold perpetrators of atrocity crimes accountable.
3. Review and evaluate regulations governing the supply and use of firearms in PNG.
4. Continue to implement the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence 2016-2025.
5. Ensure it fulfils its Responsibility to Protect all populations and prevent further escalation of violence by addressing root causes.

On Bougainville, the government should:

1. Ensure a free, fair, and peaceful referendum including adequate access to information for voters.
2. Respect the result of the referendum.
3. In the event of a vote for independence, support Bougainville to become economically self-reliant.

The international community should:

1. Offer and provide independent monitoring of the referendum
2. Urge the government to ensure a free and fair referendum and to respect the results.
3. Support Bougainville in the implementation of the referendum result.

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<sup>i</sup> 'I'm coming for you': PNG PM furious after children, pregnant women massacred, 10 July 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/oceania/pregnant-women-children-reportedly-killed-in-png-violence-20190710-p525t6.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Prianka Srinivasan, Bethanie Harriman and Isobelle Roe, Papua New Guinea massacre of women and children highlights poor policing, gun influx, 11 July 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-10/png-tribal-massacre-poor-policing-weapons-influx-fuel-violence/11297136>

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.femilipng.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/PNG-GBV\\_Strategy-2016-2025\\_150816.pdf](http://www.femilipng.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/PNG-GBV_Strategy-2016-2025_150816.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Jewel Topsfield, New steps in a nation's quest to end family violence, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/oceania/new-steps-in-a-nation-s-quest-to-end-family-violence-20191010-p52zcv.html>

<sup>v</sup> Unseen, Unsafe: Underinvestment in ending violence against children in the Pacific and Timor Leste, [https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/29d0e266-a7d2-4200-ae47-d5e46e34bc79/STC01615\\_Unseen-Unsafe-Report\\_Web-\(1\).pdf.aspx](https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/29d0e266-a7d2-4200-ae47-d5e46e34bc79/STC01615_Unseen-Unsafe-Report_Web-(1).pdf.aspx)

<sup>vi</sup> Ben Bohane, The Bougainville Referendum and Beyond, 8 October 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/bougainville-referendum-and-beyond>

<sup>vii</sup> Grant Wyeth, Delayed But Looming: The Question of Bougainville Independence, 14 March 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/delayed-but-looming-the-question-of-bougainville-independence/>