

Papua New Guinea - High

Over 37% of the population of Papua New Guinea (PNG) lives below the poverty line.ⁱ Such high rates of poverty can be a risk factor for social and political unrest, and indeed PNG has seen high levels of conflict and violence, especially since the 2017 election. In May 2019, Prime Minister Peter O’Neill resigned and James Marape was elected leader, promising improvements in health care, education and the economy. To date little improvement has been seen.ⁱⁱ Tensions are exacerbated by the presence of extractive industries, which have historically seen little or unequal revenue returned to local communities as well as long term environmental destruction.

In the referendum held in November 2019, 97.7% voted in favour of independence for Bougainville. The referendum had been promised as part of the 2001 peace agreement. Since the referendum is non-binding, Bougainville is now in a period of limbo that could lead to political and social unrest if the PNG government obstructs the result or if negotiations go on indefinitely.ⁱⁱⁱ The history of violent conflict around Bougainville’s independence provides a further risk factor for outbreaks of violence in the wake of the referendum, and for the commission of atrocity crimes. Around 10% of the population was lost during the civil war of 1989-1998,^{iv} and a lack of accountability for crimes committed, including massacres, torture and sexual violence, has led to a sense of injustice and ongoing grievances.^v While the referendum was carried out peacefully, those underlying tensions resulting from trauma and impunity may become inflamed should the post-referendum process not proceed effectively or in a timely manner.

PNG is plagued by extremely high levels of gender based violence in particular, a fact that was reflected in the July 2019 massacre in the Hela Province which saw several children as well as women, including pregnant women, killed.^{vi} Two out of three women in PNG experience domestic violence.^{vii} Women and girls, especially vulnerable women such as single mothers or the mentally ill, are also targeted with sorcery-related violence.^{viii} In January 2020, two women and a man were found in the Mendi River, believed to have been the victims of sorcery-related executions.^{ix} High rates of migration within the country for work and the spread of fake information on social media are both factors fuelling sorcery-related violence.^x

Although relevant legislation exists, as does a national strategy to combat gendered violence, there is a lack of enforcement of the law, and a culture of impunity continues. Attacks against women who speak out on gendered violence have also been reported.^{xi} Harassment and even extortion of LGBT people is known to take place, underscored by the criminalisation of homosexuality.^{xii}

Recent years have seen serious escalations in tribal violence, such as the Hela massacre. The introduction of modern weapons over the past three decades has “disrupted the traditional rules of tribal fighting that had historically limited the effects and consequences of the fighting and restrained fighters from going too far.”^{xiii} Tribal violence is more likely to involve fatalities, with civilians attacked and villages – including infrastructure like schools - destroyed.^{xiv} The risk of atrocity crime including crimes against humanity is significant.

Weak state structures and a lack of transparency in government can be underlying causes for a higher potential for atrocity crime. Both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reported in their 2019 overviews that police brutality and violence by security forces continues to be a problem in PNG, along with a general lack of accountability and widespread corruption.^{xv} PNG has a proposal before Parliament to establish an Independent Commission Against Corruption and is also planning a Human Rights Commission,^{xvi} both of which may result in human rights improvements over the long term.

Recommendations:

The government of Papua New Guinea should:

1. Address the severity of violence by increasing police presence in conflict-affected areas, reviewing regulations governing the supply and use of firearms, and holding perpetrators accountable.
2. Implement the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence 2016-2025 and provide sensitive and adequate support to victims of SGBV.
3. Respect the result of the Bougainville referendum and work collaboratively and in a timely manner to implement the result.
4. Take positive steps to fulfil its Responsibility to Protect by reviewing the challenges it confronts and committing to building or strengthening necessary government and non-government capacities.

Foreign donors should:

1. Support the government and civil society actors to strengthen atrocity prevention capacities, especially in the fields of the rule of law, the prevention of gender-based violence, and the establishment of local capacities for conflict resolution

ⁱ Asian Development Bank, <https://www.adb.org/countries/papua-new-guinea/poverty>

ⁱⁱ Joshua McDonald, Human Rights Stagnate Under New Leadership in Papua New Guinea, 21 January 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/human-rights-stagnate-under-new-leadership-in-papua-new-guinea/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Kylie McKenna, The Bougainville referendum: Celebrations turn to sadness and hope, 30 January 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/bougainville-referendum-celebrations-turn-sadness-and-hope>

^{iv} Kate Lyons, Bougainville referendum: region votes overwhelmingly for independence from Papua New Guinea, 11 December 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/11/bougainville-referendum-region-votes-overwhelmingly-for-independence-from-papua-new-guinea>

^v Catherine Wilson, Facing ghosts of the past in Bougainville, 11 October 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/facing-ghosts-past-bougainville>

^{vi} '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>

^{vii} Jewel Topsfield, New steps in a nation's quest to end family violence, 13 October 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/oceania/new-steps-in-a-nation-s-quest-to-end-family-violence-20191010-p52zcx.html>

^{viii} Charlie Campbell, How a 7-Year-Old Girl Survived Papua New Guinea's Crucible of Sorcery, 16 July 2019,

<https://time.com/longform/papua-new-guinea-witchcraft-justice/>

^{ix} <https://www.thenational.com.pg/sorcery-killings/>, 9 January 2020

^x Campbell, Time Magazine

^{xi} Amnesty International, Human Rights in Asia-Pacific 2019,

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa01/1354/2020/en/>

^{xii} Ibid

^{xiii} Ahmad Hallak, A violent, centuries-long war on Australia's doorstep is getting deadlier, 7 January 2020,

<https://www.smh.com.au/world/oceania/a-violent-centuries-long-war-on-australia-s-doorstep-is-getting-deadlier-20200106-p53pbb.html>

^{xiv} Ibid

^{xv} Human Rights Watch World Report 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/papua-new-guinea>, and Amnesty International

^{xvi} Johnny Blades, PNG defends human rights efforts following damning NGO report, 20

January 2020,

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/407708/png-defends-human-rights-efforts-following-damning-ngo-report>