

Papua New Guinea Risk: High

In March 2020, a massacre occurred in the highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG), resulting in the deaths of ten people including three children. Reportedly, a criminal gang was responsible for the attack, which took place at a village near Porgera in the country's Enga province.¹ It is possible the attack was linked to a massacre in Hela province in 2019, and similarly, the remoteness of the attack posed a challenge to law enforcement. According to the Seventh Day Adventist Church, a team of missionaries was ambushed and killed in the same province in March.² Protection of civilians in the highlands is a critical priority and without preventative measures the risk of further atrocities is high.

The PNG Government declared a state of emergency in late March and this continues to be extended due to the ongoing threat of the coronavirus. To date, only eight cases have been found, however testing has been limited and the rates are potentially higher.³ Existing inadequacies in PNG's health system, and underlying health conditions among the population mean that a Covid-19 outbreak could be life-threatening for much of the community. High rates of maternal mortality, tuberculosis, malaria and polio already plague the country, combined with low vaccination rates. Meanwhile the spread of myths and misinformation about the coronavirus could prevent people from seeking treatment or following preventative measures.⁴ In addition, the spread of Covid-19 in West Papua and Papua provinces of Indonesia is of concern to PNG, as illegal border crossings continue.⁵ PNG is set to receive development funds as part of Australia's Pacific COVID-19 response which may alleviate the situation to some degree.

Domestic violence rates have increased worldwide during coronavirus lockdowns and PNG, which already experiences extremely high levels of gender based violence, is no exception. A high profile case involving an athlete has brought attention to domestic violence but laws are rarely enforced to hold perpetrators accountable.⁶ The case also highlights broader gender inequalities and stereotypes in PNG. The participation of women in peacebuilding was raised recently by UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed, following her joint mission to PNG. Noting the high rates of gendered violence, she welcomed the new Highlands Joint Programme to support women and young people in peacebuilding, community resilience, supporting the rule of law and delivering inclusive services.⁷ Policies to address violence against women and to increase women's participation appear to be gaining some traction in PNG.

¹ Natalie Whiting and Hilda Wayne, Ten killed, including children, after gunmen open fire in PNG's highlands, 12 March 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-12/three-children-among-10-killed-after-gunmen-open-fire-in-png/12049834>

² Jacqueline Wari, Adventist Member and Others Killed in Ambush in Papua New Guinea, 25 March 2020, <https://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/story14624-adventist-member-and-others-killed-in-ambush-in-papua-new-guinea>

³ PNG extends State of Emergency for two weeks, 3 June 2020, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/418165/png-extends-state-of-emergency-for-two-weeks>

⁴ Ishani Kaluthotage, The health challenge in PNG is far greater than Covid-19 alone, 13 May 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/health-challenge-png-far-greater-covid-19-alone>

⁵ Hugh McClure, COVID-19 – the Pacific response: 27 May, <https://www.policyforum.net/covid-19-the-pacific-response-27-may/>

⁶ Jarni, Blakkarly, Domestic violence assault on PNG athlete is 'just the tip of the iceberg', <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/domestic-violence-assault-on-png-athlete-is-just-the-tip-of-the-iceberg>

⁷ Women Play Key Role in Crafting Peaceful, Sustainable Future for Papua New Guinea, Deputy Secretary-General Says, Briefing Peacebuilding Commission on Recent Visit, 13 May 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/papua-new-guinea/women-play-key-role-crafting-peaceful-sustainable-future-papua-new-guinea>

Prior to the pandemic, PNG already suffered high rates of poverty and unemployment, with over 37% of the population living below the poverty line.⁸ The economic effects of the virus on small businesses, and potential impacts on PNG's resource extraction industry, could worsen the economic situation and pose a risk factor for social unrest. Political tensions may also escalate in relation to the arrest of former PNG Prime Minister, Peter O'Neill, who has been charged with misappropriation, official corruption and abuse of office.⁹

Finally, the Bougainville Referendum Commission has presented its final report to the government. 98 percent voted in support of independence. Beginning in September 2020, the governments of PNG and Bougainville will begin consultations regarding the implementation of the vote results. It will be necessary to remain mindful of the history of violent conflict around Bougainville's independence as a potential risk factor for outbreaks of conflict, should negotiations stall. The tendency towards social unrest may be exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic including economic difficulties and the mental health impact of lockdowns.

Recommendations:

The government of Papua New Guinea should:

1. Develop strategies to prevent violence in PNG Highlands and to protect civilians from atrocity crimes. This could include increasing police presence in conflict-affected areas, reviewing regulations governing the supply and use of firearms, and holding perpetrators accountable.
2. Work collaboratively with the Bougainville Government to progress consultations from September.
3. Commit to improvements in health care and hospitals for the people of PNG.

⁸ Asian Development Bank, <https://www.adb.org/countries/papua-new-guinea/poverty>

⁹ Natalie Whiting, Former PNG prime minister Peter O'Neill charged with misappropriation, corruption and abuse of office, 25 May 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/radio-australia/programs/pacificbeat/former-png-prime-minister-peter-oneill-on-corruption-charges/12281910>