

**Papua New Guinea Risk: Moderate**

The risk of atrocities in PNG is moderate as pressure from the coronavirus pandemic and existing structural fragilities within the country heighten the potential for atrocity crimes. The government continues to grapple with the effects of the pandemic. As of early November, the country has recorded 590 total cases with seven deaths. According to official government sources and independent analysis, the rates may be much higher due to limited testing throughout the country and continued population movements.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic has placed greater strain on the country's already limited health system, which was a key reason for the government to declare and extend a state of emergency. In response, the government has improved its communication and awareness raising methods of COVID-19 by creating "Niupela Pasin" ("New Normal"), a series of measures to promote basic hygiene and safety during the pandemic. It has also started releasing video messages and songs by PNG musicians to counteract the spread of misinformation and stigma around the disease and the testing process.<sup>2</sup> However, while funding and technical aid from the WHO and other donors such as Australia<sup>3</sup> has provided an opportunity for the country to strengthen its health infrastructure and community education campaigns,<sup>4</sup> a continued lack of capacity in the country's health system sees much of the population still at risk of the disease.<sup>5</sup>

In the wake of the spread of COVID-19 within PNG, the country's border with Indonesia continues to be a concern, despite official border crossing points remaining closed. The border regions have been traditionally porous, with an estimated eight illegal entry points<sup>6</sup> that have facilitated the crossing of smugglers and guerrillas, as well as refugees, from West Papua.<sup>7</sup> With a dramatic rise in cases in Indonesia,<sup>8</sup> an increase in coronavirus cases within these border regions already isolated from government and health facilities, could cause widespread deaths and potential unrest.

PNG's economy is expected to contract by approximately 4 percent due to the pandemic. Initiatives to improve physical infrastructure and access to electricity, water, transportation and ICT services have stalled under the current outbreak.<sup>9</sup> Further economic degradation due to the pandemic could worsen the already tenuous viability of many people's livelihoods, and this has the potential to cause

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<sup>1</sup> Max Roser et al. 2020. *Papua New Guinea: Coronavirus Pandemic Country Profile*, <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/papua-new-guinea?country=~PNG>; PNG National Department of Health and World Health Organization, 2020. *Papua New Guinea Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Health Situation Report #44*, [https://covid19.info.gov.pg/files/Situation%20Report/PNG%20COVID-19%20Health%20Situation%20Report%2044%20%282020-10-25%29\\_FINAL.pdf](https://covid19.info.gov.pg/files/Situation%20Report/PNG%20COVID-19%20Health%20Situation%20Report%2044%20%282020-10-25%29_FINAL.pdf), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> PNG National Department of Health and World Health Organization, 2020. *Papua New Guinea Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Health Situation Report #30*, [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/wpro---documents/countries/papua-new-guinea/covid-19/png-covid-19-health-situation-report-30.pdf?sfvrsn=91c4846d\\_2](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/wpro---documents/countries/papua-new-guinea/covid-19/png-covid-19-health-situation-report-30.pdf?sfvrsn=91c4846d_2), p. 7, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Liam Fox and Erin Handley, 2020. 'Australia's aid program increased to help Pacific neighbours fight COVID-19'. *ABC News*, 7 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-07/foreign-aid-budget-unofficial-increase-pacific-asia-covid-19/12737096>.

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization, 2020. *Papua New Guinea tackles the threat of COVID-19 with an all-of-government approach*, <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/papua-new-guinea-tackles-the-threat-of-covid-19-with-an-all-of-government-approach>.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Kabuni, 2020. *COVID-19 (Coronavirus) in Papua New Guinea: The State of Emergency Cannot Fix Years of Negligence*, [http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2020-05/dpa\\_in\\_brief\\_202015\\_kabuni.pdf](http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2020-05/dpa_in_brief_202015_kabuni.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Elias Nanau, 2020. *Illegal Border Entry Points Identified*, <https://postcourier.com.pg/illegal-border-entry-points-identified/>.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Ivarature, 2020. *Papua New Guinea must control its borders*, <https://www.policyforum.net/papua-new-guinea-must-control-its-borders/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> World Bank Group, 2020. *In the Time of COVID-19: From Relief to Recovery – Papua New Guinea Economic Update July 2020*, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34079/Papua-New-Guinea-Economic-Update-In-the-Time-of-COVID-19-From-Relief-to-Recovery.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>, p. ix – xi.

widespread unrest. PNG contains for the most part a rural and remote population with a significant percentage living below the poverty line. Tribal violence, a long standing aspect of PNG society, remains a problem in these remote areas. With the added strain of the pandemic on government services, prevention and response options to such violence are further constrained, contributing to the high risk of atrocity crime in the country.

The economic downturn caused by the pandemic has escalated the already high rates of sexual and gender-based violence within the country. SGBV is widespread in PNG, with an estimated two thirds of women suffering some form of violence in their lifetime. Triggers of SGBV include marital and financial disagreements,<sup>10</sup> and with the onset of the state of emergency and introduction of travel restrictions and public lockdowns, economic stress has become a primary factor in domestic violence incidents. Lockdown measures further decreased the access women had to SGBV support services.<sup>11</sup> There are ongoing efforts by the government and the international community to address SGBV and pervasive gender inequalities in PNG. In October, the UN opened two offices in the Highlands region as part of the Highlands Joint Programme aimed at improving development of this area of PNG. The Programme will tackle multiple development issues in the region, including economic and educational capacity building, and work alongside male advocates to rehabilitate perpetrators of SGBV and sorcery-related killings.<sup>12</sup>

Planned consultations between PNG and Bougainville following the latter's independence referendum late last year have been postponed due to the pandemic. Bougainville recorded its first coronavirus case in August, and the PNG government extended a state of emergency in the region until late September in an effort to curb the spread. Despite the ongoing pandemic, Bougainville carried out its presidential elections, electing Ishmael Toroama, a former member of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, as President.<sup>13</sup> PNG and Bougainville have committed to peaceful talks in good faith, however there remains a chance of conflict breaking out between the two parties. The ten-year civil war in Bougainville killed up to 20,000 people, with few opportunities for reconciliation and healing. The independence referendum is non-binding, with the PNG government having the final say over proceedings. Bougainville's independence would have significant geopolitical consequences.<sup>14</sup> Negotiations over Bougainville's future have the potential to see conflict erupt, along with a corresponding increased risk of the commission of atrocity crimes.

## Recommendations

The government of Papua New Guinea should:

1. Develop strategies and equip the health sector to manage the ongoing effects of the pandemic, and make efforts to increase testing rates.

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<sup>10</sup> International Women's Development Agency, 2020. *Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women: COVID-19 Domestic Violence Against Women in Papua New Guinea*, [https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/COVID-19-and-Gender-Based-Violence-in-PNG-FINAL-Submission\\_v3.pdf](https://iwda.org.au/assets/files/COVID-19-and-Gender-Based-Violence-in-PNG-FINAL-Submission_v3.pdf), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> UN Women, 2020. *Gender Alert On COVID-19 in Papua New Guinea*, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Gender%20alert%20on%20COVID19%20IN%20PNG%20I%20Issue%201.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF, 2020. *UN Strengthens Presence in Highlands with Offices Opened in Mendi and Tari*, <https://www.unicef.org/png/press-releases/un-strengthens-presence-highlands-offices-opened-mendi-and-tari>.

<sup>13</sup> Bougainville News, 2020. *Bougainville Election News: Ishmael Toroama, a former secessionist military commander turned peacemaker has been elected president*, <https://bougainvillenews.com/2020/09/24/bougainville-election-news-ishmael-toroama-a-former-secessionist-military-commander-turned-peacemaker-has-been-elected-the-president/>.

<sup>14</sup> Grant Wyeth, 2020. *Bougainville Prepares for Presidential Election*, <https://thediomat.com/2020/07/bougainville-prepares-for-presidential-election/>.

2. Develop and monitor violence prevention strategies in the Highlands to mitigate tribal and sorcery-related violence.
3. Collaborate with Indonesia to control border flows to stop the potential spread of COVID-19.
4. Engage constructively and collaboratively with the new government of Bougainville on the independence referendum outcome