

Papua New Guinea Risk: Moderate

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to exacerbate challenges to health care in PNG, where health infrastructure is generally weak, and access to government services, especially in the many remote parts of the country, is limited. Social, economic and political pressures, mental health impacts of lockdowns, low rates of Covid testing, job insecurity and systemic fragilities are all present and can elevate the potential for social unrest. The PNG government is finalising the country's vaccine roll out with plans to begin in March 2021, with frontline workers and high risk citizens to receive the vaccine first.¹ It is unclear where the vaccine is being obtained, with recent claims by China to be assisting PNG being refuted by PNG's Acting Foreign Minister.² Concerns have also been raised about how to target the vaccine to the most affected regions, and around other health service needs such as improved facilities and attention to other rampant diseases.³

Issues of corruption and a lack of transparency, and an overall mistrust of the country's governance, have manifested again recently with a company promising a sustainable forestry project in PNG was been found to have paid bribes to PNG officials in order to purchase a timber company at a massive discount.⁴ Meanwhile, there are concerns about Chinese plans for a fishing plant and city on the island of Daru, just north of Australia's border in the Torres Strait. In addition to existing land title claims by six groups on the island,⁵ locals are worried about the adverse impact to their livelihood should the fishing farm plans proceed, and are seeking to be consulted about the proposal.⁶ This project joins a number of others agreed upon between China and PNG under the One Belt, One Road agenda.

PNG has a history of foreign-owned extractive industries which are often exploitative, unsustainable, and return few benefits to the local population. Underlying tensions, along with policies that do not take into account the needs of local communities, can create simmering resentments and a lack of trust in authorities. In turn, this can lead to conflict within groups, and between communities, the private sector and governments.

Structural risk factors for atrocity crime present in PNG mean there is potential for a trigger such as a natural disaster, an episode of tribal violence, or a political event, to lead to violent conflict, and potential atrocity crimes. While there had been Covid-related delays to negotiations between PNG and Bougainville following the independence referendum in 2019, a recent meeting between PNG's Prime Minister James Marape and Bougainville's President Ishmael Toroama produced several outcomes, including agreement on financial payments and a framework for consultations.⁷

Recommendations

The government of Papua New Guinea should:

- Develop strategies to ensure the Covid-19 vaccine roll out is fair and equitable, delivered to high risk individuals and frontline workers first, and reaches vulnerable and remote communities;
- Improve transparency and governance and ensure local communities are consulted on economic decisions that may have an impact on their land and livelihood;
- Continue to work towards improved access to services for those in remote areas;
- Continue to engage constructively with the new government of Bougainville on the independence referendum outcome.

¹ Marian Faa, PNG: COVID-19 vaccination could begin next month, ABC, <https://www.abc.net.au/radio-australia/programs/pacificbeat/png--government-considering-covid-vaccine-plan/13139270>

² Tasha Wibawa and Bethanie Harriman, China claims it's providing coronavirus vaccines to Papua New Guinea, but officials in Port Moresby say it's not true, ABC, 5 February 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-05/china-claims-to-assist-png-with-covid-19-vaccines/13127006>

³ COVID-19 vaccination could begin next month, op. cit.

⁴ Kristian Lasslett, Ben Doherty and PNGi, 'Too good to be true': the deal with an Isis-linked Australian family that betrayed PNG's most marginalised, The Guardian, 13 February 2021.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/13/too-good-to-be-true-the-deal-with-an-isis-linked-australian-family-that-betrayed-pngs-most-marginalised>

⁵ Aaron Smith, Australia 'overreacting' to Chinese development plans on northern border, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/15/australia-overreacting-to-chinese-development-plans-on-northern-border>, 15 February 2021.

⁶ Natalie Whiting, Locals in Papua New Guinea speak out as China's proposed industrial fishing park sets off alarm bells in Canberra, 10 February 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-10/png-daru-fishing-park-china-australia-tensions-james-marape/13136188>

⁷ Bougainville leader hails new understanding with PNG, 8 February 2021, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/436004/bougainville-leader-hails-new-understanding-with-png>