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TRANSNATIONAL CRIME ON THE RISE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: CHALLENGES AND SOME WAYS IT CAN BE ADDRESSED

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Abstract

In Papua New Guinea (PNG), the country's geographical location is seen as a contributory factor to the increase in transnational crimes at the border areas. The inadequate capacity among police personnel and insecure borders have led to a rise in activities such as human trafficking, wildlife trafficking, firearms smuggling, drug smuggling, artifact smuggling, and maritime piracy. This paper analyses the factors that have contributed to the growth of transnational crimes in the country and the challenges faced by law enforcement agencies in combating these crimes. Additionally, the paper provides policy recommendations to address the occurrence of transnational crimes at the border locations of PNG.

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TRANSNATIONAL CRIME ON THE RISE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: CHALLENGES AND SOME WAYS IT CAN BE ADDRESSED

By **Julian Melpa**

Introduction

This article is based on presentations made by government and non-governmental organisations at Papua New Guinea National Research Institute (PNG NRI) during a Chairman Seminar Series on National Security. The seminar took place at PNG NRI from Thursday, 13 April to Friday, 14 April 2023. The topics presented focused on population and movements, energy, food, biosecurity, and transnational issues affecting Papua New Guinea. National security is becoming prominent in the country and is seen as a cross-cutting issue economically, socially, environmentally, and in terms of governance and institutions. Different presenters elaborated that national security is not only military, as many people believe, but also includes areas such as economic security, energy security, environmental security, cyber-security, illicit drug trafficking, piracy, corruption, and bribery of public officials.

In PNG, the focal security threats to the citizenry are urban crime, gender-based violence, corruption, arms trafficking, border protection, resource poaching, climate change, natural disasters, and transnational crime (Dinnen, 2017). For PNG to grow and develop sustainably, national security is critical. National security is defined as “the protection of citizens, national sovereignty, democratic rights, freedoms and values, strategic assets and resources, and the well-being and prosperity of Papua New Guinea and its people” (Papua New Guinea National Security Policy, 2013). This definition clarifies that the government’s highest priority is to protect the independent state, its people, and its institutions. However, national security remains one of the biggest development challenges in Papua New Guinea. Efforts have been made by the government to address national security issues, but it remains problematic at the national level.

This article specifically focuses on transnational crime, its definition, the enabling factors for its expansion, existing transnational crimes, challenges, and the way forward to combat the increase of transnational crime in PNG.

Methods

This paper was restricted to desktop research, reviewing of secondary sources relating to transnational crime. Most documents were downloaded but only a few were selected after going through their abstract, results, and conclusion sections. The period used was between 2015 and 2023, however, due to inadequate information available, the period was extended to 2000 up to 2023.

Most of the information presented in the paper was built on from the presentation made by Yamasombi (2023) on Transnational Organized Crimes and brief on the Role of National Narcotics Bureau at PNG NRI during a Chairman Seminar Series in 2023. Note-taking and audio recording were utilised during the presentation to capture the main ideas presented. Other sources were online newspaper articles and Pacific News while some information was based on observations and experiences around our communities, districts, provinces, and at the national level.

What is transnational crime?

“Transnational crime” refers to criminal activities that extend beyond borders, boundaries, jurisdictions, and nations (Tung, 2021). It is a form of cross-border crime (Collins, 2001). The Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary (RCPNG) defines transnational crime as criminal activities committed in multiple countries or when a crime is planned, prepared, and coordinated in one country but committed in another (Yamasombi, 2023). Transnational crime involves crossing national boundaries and jurisdictions, typically involving organised criminal groups (Mitna, 2014). These criminal activities can vary and are often carried out by individuals from multiple countries working together to make quick money. Transnational crime serves as an umbrella term that encompasses various sub-classifications of criminal activities.

Transnational crime has detrimental effects on local and national economies, the environment, and public health and well-being. However, it is viewed as a lucrative business with high profits (May and Clough, 2017). The primary motivation for engaging in transnational crime across multiple countries is the desire for fast money. Additionally, the consequences of transnational crime committed in one country have the potential to impact neighbouring countries (Yamasombi, 2023). This means that criminal syndicates in multiple countries collaborate in planning and preparation to commit crimes in another country.

What enables the growth of transnational crime in Papua New Guinea?

“Papua New Guinea provides a favourable environment for the growth of transnational criminal activities” (Mitna, 2014). Transnational crime has the ability to rapidly expand its network in Papua New Guinea due to numerous enabling factors in the country. The following factors contribute to the growth of transnational crime.

1. Weak Governance

Weak governance structures refer to situations where the government is unwilling or fails to fulfill its roles and responsibilities. Weak governance stems from mismanagement, maladministration, lack of cooperation, miscoordination, negligence, corruption, and more. The absence of enabling legislation creates an environment conducive to the expansion of transnational crimes. Although the introduction of the Control Substance Act in 2021 aimed to address this issue, it appears that the act is not effectively utilised for enforcing the law. Papua New Guinea’s weak governance system allows transnational crime to rapidly expand within a short period of time. Good governance is not about ownership; it is about stewardship (Donohue, 2022). Stewardship involves effectively and efficiently fulfilling leadership roles and responsibilities, while ownership reflects poor governance and a failure to fulfill obligations to the people and the country.

2. Corruption

Corruption involves dishonesty and the abuse of power by individuals in positions of authority. Government intervention in the economy is the root cause of corruption (Chen et al., 2023). Various forms of corruption are observed in Papua New Guinea, including the mismanagement of public funds, political corruption, organised crime along the PNG border, money laundering, nepotism (known as the “wantok system”), favouritism, gift-giving, discretionary

powers, and bribery (Wickberg, 2013). These forms of corruption contribute to weakening the governance system and hinder law enforcement in the country. For example, bribery involves offering something valuable, such as money, to public officials or individuals in authority in exchange for unfair rewards (Zhang et al., 2023). Bribery violates ethical principles and enables various illegal activities. Transnational organised criminals can easily commit crimes with the assistance of corrupt government officials, business managers, and individuals in authority. Corruption has hindered economic growth and development in Papua New Guinea, providing fertile ground for the expansion of transnational crime and exacerbating law and order issues.

3. Improved Technology

Technology plays an increasingly prevalent role in criminal activities (Tung, 2021). Advancements in technology create an enabling environment for transnational crime to expand its network without the need for organised gang groups. Criminals utilise technology in various ways to commit crimes. Transnational crime is often carried out by well-organised criminal groups comprising individuals from different countries who possess diverse skills. Technology serves as a tool to manipulate both the people and government systems. Currently, criminal groups employ online technology for criminal activities, such as using fake social media accounts (e.g., Facebook, Google, email, Instagram, Twitter) and creating fraudulent company profiles (e.g., Golden Sun PNG Limited, an online scam company that victimised many Papua New Guineans in 2023). Transnational crime thrives in Papua New Guinea as criminals exploit technology to plan, prepare, and coordinate their activities effectively.

4. Poverty

Poverty refers to a state in which individuals lack the essential elements needed to sustain themselves in the future. According to UNICEF Papua New Guinea (2022), 40 percent of the population in PNG lives below the extreme poverty line, with 41 percent of children living in poverty. Despite being rich in natural resources, Papua New Guinea experiences significant income inequality (UNICEF, 2022). The income inequality and lack of income-generating opportunities drive criminal gangs to engage in illegal activities to generate quick income. Extreme poverty in PNG contributes to the growth of transnational crime.

5. Geographical Location

Papua New Guinea’s geographical location plays a significant role in enabling transnational crime. The country shares borders with Indonesia to the west, Australia to the south,

and the Solomon Islands to the southeast. It is situated in the southwestern Pacific region. Due to its location, PNG serves as a transit point for smuggling firearms, drugs, trafficking wildlife, marine piracy, and other transnational crimes across borders. The country poses a high risk for the uncontrolled movement of people and goods by land and sea, as its borders are largely open. This enables boats to make illegal crossings at night and contraband to be smuggled along the northern and southern maritime borders (Bergin & Bateman, 2023). It appears that Papua New Guinean border security lacks the capacity to effectively combat most transnational crimes occurring along the PNG-Indonesia border. Recent incidents such as the arrest of three men from Hela in possession of marijuana valued at around K50,000 (US\$15,000) at North Fly in PNG, highlights the vulnerability of the border to drug smuggling (Kumar, 2023). Papua New Guinea's strategic location makes it susceptible to the rapid increase of transnational crime along its borders with Indonesia.

In conclusion, transnational crime refers to criminal activities that surpass borders, boundaries, jurisdictions, and nations. Papua New Guinea offers a conducive environment for the growth of transnational criminal activities. Weak governance, corruption, improved technology, poverty, and the country's geographical location contribute to the increase of transnational crime in Papua New Guinea. Addressing these factors is crucial in effectively combating transnational crime and ensuring the safety and well-being of the country and its people.

What are some of the existing transnational crimes in Papua New Guinea?

Human Trafficking – In PNG, human trafficking is becoming a major security concern. Different types of human trafficking include child abuse, forced sex, companies employing prostitutes, sex trade (exchanging sex for jobs or academic grades), forced labour, domestic servitude, and more. Human trafficking occurs when criminals use force to trade people of all ages and exploit them for profit. For instance, a large group of armed men recently held 17 girls from a remote village in PNG captive, demanding the government to pay them K40,000 (NZ\$18,000) and 10 pigs before releasing the girls to their families (Asia Pacific Report, 2023). While waiting for the payment, the criminals sexually abused the girls. In another case, a nightclub harbouring foreign prostitutes in Gordons, National Capital District, was raided by police (Yamasombi, 2023). Human trafficking is a harsh reality in PNG that needs to be addressed at the national level.

Wildlife Trafficking – This form of crime occurs when people are involved in the illegal trade of endangered species, poaching, protected wildlife, or their products (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019). Smuggling of wildlife in PNG has led to the extinction of rare species. Benjamin Vali, a senior scientist from the PNG Forest Research Institute in Lae, revealed that wildlife crime is a lucrative business, with reports of parrots, snakes, and insects being smuggled overseas, although the culprits were caught by customs agents in other countries (Bailey, 2016). PNG's unique and beautiful biodiversity is at risk due to ineffective monitoring of the wildlife trade internationally. Papua New Guineans prioritise business and economic development at the expense of our natural environment, resulting in the loss of rare plants and animals. Wildlife trade is a serious environmental conservation problem.

Firearm Smuggling – This refers to the illegal trade of firearms in a country. In Papua New Guinea, smuggling of firearms is a major national security issue. Police Commissioner Mr. David Manning stated that smuggling of illegal firearms is a criminal act (Ukuma, 2023). Concerns have been raised by the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary and the PNG Defence Force regarding the smuggling of illegal firearms into the country. It is believed that illegal firearms are being smuggled into PNG through neighbouring countries.

A firearm dealer stated that the demand for smuggling firearms in PNG is high, which encourages more criminals to get involved for profit (Ligaiula, 2021). Weak border security along the PNG-Indonesia border has allowed over 200,000 Australian unregistered firearms to be traded with Papua New Guineans (Finkeo, 2023). Smuggling of firearms is on the rise in PNG and poses a serious national security issue that requires urgent intervention.

Drug Smuggling – This refers to the illegal transportation of drugs traded from one country to another, violating customs legislation. Drug smuggling is directly linked to the smuggling of firearms. Trade for drugs with illegal firearms or vice versa is common along the borders of PNG and Indonesia. Dealers from different countries take several illegal border crossings to trade drugs. "Along Skow, border between Jayapura and Wutung in PNG alone, there are about eight illegal border crossings and open access through the sea route to transport drugs" (Kandipi, 2015). Organised criminal gangs are involved in smuggling drugs to meet the high demand in both countries. Smuggling of drugs into the country along the borders is common in PNG and other Pacific Island countries. Pacific Island countries are known for the production and trafficking of methamphetamine,

cocaine, and heroin, earning them the nickname “Pacific Drug Highway” (Nangoi & Zarriga, 2023). Drug smuggling poses a challenge to the economic development of PNG and the well-being of the younger generation.

Artifacts Smuggling – Artifacts smuggling refers to the illegal transportation/trade of artifacts from one place to another. The original artwork of PNG craftsmen and women, including paintings, sculptures, carvings, and architecture, is being compromised due to a lack of effective policies to preserve and protect Papua New Guinean art. PNG’s artifacts need to be respected and protected to maintain their significance and value around the world. Many of PNG’s artifacts have been smuggled to other countries for profit, including carved wooden sculptures, masks, slit drums (garamut), grass skirts, Tapa cloth, and more. PNG is famous for its rich and diverse traditional artifacts, culture, language, and magnificent biodiversity. Laws need to be strengthened and enforced to protect our identity and culture, ensuring that the diverse traditional artwork continues to tell a story from generation to generation.

Maritime Piracy – This criminal activity occurs at sea, where ships are hijacked, and people are taken hostage. PNG is vulnerable to maritime piracy due to its extensive coastline and large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The open sea borders of PNG make it prone to transnational criminal activities, including maritime piracy. Illegal fishing along the sea borders of PNG with Australia, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Solomon Islands is also increasing. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in PNG waters robs the fishing industry of millions of PNG Kina worth of fish (Nangoi & Tom, 2022). Maritime piracy is a serious national security issue that requires government attention to strengthen sea border security. Inadequate efforts have been made to address transnational criminal activities happening along the maritime borders, leading to concerns on law and order.

What are some of the challenges to fighting transnational crime in PNG?

Transnational crime poses a significant national security threat in PNG due to weak law enforcement, creating an environment that allows it to thrive. While efforts have been made to address this issue, there are challenges that hinder consistent action against it. This section provides a brief overview of some common challenges experienced in the country.

One of the challenges is the inadequate skills to investigate organised criminal groups. Transnational crime is committed

by well-organised groups, making proper investigation complex and challenging for the PNG Royal Constabulary. Police officers in PNG lack the necessary skills to effectively investigate such crimes. While they may be proficient in exploring homicide, break-and-enter, and fraud cases, they lack the specific skills required for dealing with transnational organised crimes. This lack of skills was evident in a murder case against six soldiers, where the police investigation was deemed insufficient due to a lack of evidence. There is a need for intelligence capacity building to equip police officers with the necessary skills to combat transnational crime effectively.

Another challenge is the reactive approach taken by the police. In PNG, law enforcement officers tend to be more reactive rather than proactive. They respond quickly once crimes have been committed, but there is a need for a shift towards a proactive approach that aims to prevent crimes before they occur.

The lack of expertise to analyse substances is also a challenge. While the PNG police have made arrests related to drug smuggling, they lack the experts and equipment necessary to analyse and test drugs. This expertise is crucial for policymakers to make informed decisions regarding the impact of drug consumption on the country’s economic development and growth. Additionally, PNG lacks the equipment to conduct field presumptive tests and establish well-equipped laboratories for substance analysis.

Inadequate collaboration between law enforcement agencies is another challenge. Transnational crime cannot be effectively addressed by a single agency. It requires collaboration between different agencies to combat the well-organised criminal groups involved. Effective collaboration is essential for addressing transnational crime as a national security issue and strengthening law enforcement in PNG.

Some policy-related suggestions

- 1. Offer more training** – The government should focus on offering more training for law enforcement officers to build their capacity with the right skills and techniques to investigate the occurrence of transnational crimes. In addition, the focus should also be on the development training of more intelligent specialists for technology and drug substance analysis.
- 2. Proactive approach** – Law enforcement officers should take a more proactive approach to plan and prepare to stabilise the transnational crime in the country rather than being reactive after the crime being committed by the well-organised transnational criminals.

3. **Engagement of experts** – An expert specialist for substance analysis should be engaged to train more local law enforcement officers on how to analyse substances such as drugs and alcohol, in the laboratory. The skills gained from the expert can be used to train other officers in Papua New Guinea from generation to generation.
4. **Provide more resources** – The government should invest more in law enforcement agencies to provide more resources to strengthen national security along the borders of Papua New Guinea. For instance, officers who are providing security along PNG and Indonesian borders need to be fully equipped with the proper resources to protect the borders, likewise for water police out in the open sea and the air to strengthen national security.
5. **Establishment of laboratory** – PNG should build a special laboratory for substance analysis. For example, to test drugs. There is a greater need for drugs to be tested in a laboratory to inform the public about the consequences of drug consumption and its impact on economic growth and development.
6. **Effective collaboration between responsible agencies** – All responsible agencies should work together to effectively fight against transnational crime to strengthen national security along the borders of PNG land, sea and air. Law enforcement agencies cannot work in isolation to combat transnational crime, it requires all agencies to work together as a team to effectively fight against the increase of transnational crime in the country to ensure a safer and more secure Papua New Guinea now and into the future.
7. **More awareness and education** – The increase in transnational crime is already a threat to the sovereignty of Papua New Guinea, therefore, awareness should be carried out to inform citizens in both rural and urban areas about how it affects the everyday lives of the people and the economy of PNG.

Conclusion

In conclusion, transnational crime poses significant challenges to PNG's national security. Poor governance, corruption, improved technology, poverty, and geographical location creates an enabling environment for criminals to expand their network. To address these challenges, the government should invest in capacity building, train law enforcement officers to be more proactive in their approach, recruit experts in the field, provide full resources for law

enforcement, establish a laboratory for substance analysis, more awareness and promote effective collaboration between responsible agencies. By taking these steps, PNG can work towards minimising the occurrence of transnational crime and ensuring a safer and more secure future.

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