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## THE DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: INCIDENTS REPORTED FROM THE HIGHLANDS REGION FROM 2018 TO 2022

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### Key Points

- Incidences of tribal violence in the Highlands has been common over the past years.
- Different types of tribal violence like tribal fight, law and order issues, and election-related violence have their own drivers.
- Harm and damage caused during conflicts and related violence are extreme and affect the livelihood of community members.
- A collective approach in peace building is strongly encouraged to bring forward lasting peace in the communities, and must involve all actors of peace builders like government, donor partners, churches and youth leaders.

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## THE DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: INCIDENTS REPORTED FROM THE HIGHLANDS REGION FROM 2018 TO 2022

By Joe Barak

Tribal violence has been rife around Papua New Guinea (PNG) in recent years. Reports in both the national and international media and anecdotal evidence indicate that the prevalence of crime and violence is high in the country, and presents an important obstacle to long term development (Lakhani & Willman, 2014). Conflict and violence is a threat to the country's internal security, the public, and the economy at large. Issues of tribal violence have historically been an integral part of social life in some parts of PNG and have traditionally taken place between neighbouring clans also known as 'tribes', but can also take place within clan units, and even within families and communities (Lakhani & Willman, 2014).

Over the past several years, there has been concern over what is widely perceived to be an escalation of violence in PNG, particularly in the Highlands Region. The government, political leaders, churches, and development partners always condemn violence against people across the region in the strongest possible terms. A common response is for an immediate ceasefire, signing of peace agreement, compensation, and for urgent deployment of security forces for support. These events are often reported in the daily newspapers and at press conferences. The widespread prevalence of high levels of crime and violence has been linked to ethnic diversity, weaknesses in law and order, the growing use of firearms, a lack of effectiveness of law enforcement, and the introduction of large-scale natural resource projects, amongst other drivers (Lakhani & Willman, 2014).

There are no reliable sources of data about how much harm is caused and how much violence is there due to poor sources of live data. Tragically, many have been killed, injured, properties destroyed, and people displaced during incidences of conflicts and violence. Sometimes, women, children and the elderly are cut off from access to basic needs for survival. Additionally, basic services such as health facilities and schools are destroyed, making it even more difficult to access them.

This article discusses the findings of a study conducted by PNG National Research Institute and Australia National

University which documented incidences of conflicts and violence that have occurred in the Highlands Region of PNG. The data was collected using news reports published in the two main daily printed newspapers: *The National* and *Post Courier*. The newspaper reports were for a period of five years – 2018 to 2022. This paper discusses the types of violent incidences reported and the types of harm caused by the violence. It also tries to explore the factors that drove the incidences of violence and concludes with possible strategies to address this issue at the community level.

### The location and statistics of violent incidents

The findings indicated that the majority of intergroup violence is happening in the upper Highlands. As can be seen in Table 1, Enga, Hela, and Western Highlands provinces are reported as having had the highest number of cases.

Table 1. Location and number of incidents reported in *The National* and *Post Courier* newspapers.

| Province           | Number of Violent Incidents | Percentage |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| Enga               | 79                          | 27.8       |
| Western Highlands  | 53                          | 18.9       |
| Hela               | 50                          | 17.8       |
| Jiwaka             | 32                          | 11.4       |
| Southern Highlands | 31                          | 11         |
| Eastern Highlands  | 25                          | 8.9        |
| Chimbu             | 10                          | 3.2        |
| Total              | 280                         | 99.4       |

### Reported incidents of intergroup violence

The first insight drawn from the data is the extent of intergroup violence reported in the two daily newspapers. From the results, tribal fight had the highest record of incidents reported (55.5%), followed by lawlessness (20.6%), and election-related violence (10.0%). These are the three main types of violence from the region as shown in Figure 1 including incidences of other types of violence.

destroyed. Properties worth millions of Kina were destroyed and burnt down to ashes. Food gardens were also destroyed, and livestock killed which affected the livelihood of the people. There were also instances of destruction and closure of basic government services like health facilities, schools, and government stations. These impacts of violence show that the tendency of losing properties and other valuable assets during conflict is very high in the region.

- **Displacement of people**

There were 59 incidents of people living in conflict communities being displaced because of the trauma experienced as a result of violence. The affected people fled to seek refuge in fear of their lives. Such security reasons cause people to migrate to other places. Thus, the safety of vulnerable people, especially the elderly, women, children and youth is not guaranteed during tribal conflicts. Hence, they have to leave their villages for nearby towns or cities to find safety and peace, and to access basic services like health, law and order, and better education for their children.

### Strategies to address conflicts and violence

- **Collective approach to peace building**

Peace building has been an important aspect in addressing violence and conflict in communities. There have been many peace building exercises carried out by the police, parliamentary leaders, churches and donor partners. However, the actions taken have not been effective in some parts of the country. The effective ways of peace building now should take a collective approach involving all peace building actors. Peace building can be tied into a form of infrastructure developments, wealth creation, business and economic activities, church and religious activities, including the presence of law and order. All of these should be happening at the provincial level and reaching out to districts, LLGs and communities. When people are economically and socially empowered and have access to better government services, they will have less time to engage in violence. In other words, the presence of government services may contribute to minimising violence and conflicts. Therefore, peace building should be a shared responsibility for every stakeholder at the national level down to the community level.

- **Involvement of churches**

Churches play an important role in brokering peace as well as supporting the government in providing basic services. Churches can be powerful drivers of stopping prejudice and mobilising communities into making peace because religious ideas, actors, and institutions can serve as incredible resources and motivation for peace

building. There have been some good examples of how religious actors and institutions have contributed to the prevention and resolution of conflict. One practical example was reported in *The National* on 23 February 2024 where a Seventh-Day Adventist Church leader from Western Highlands reported that “they have been solving terrible wars in Pogera Valley and Hela where they involved in march with uniform and stop five fights and brought peace to the warring tribes”. Thus, considerations for how best to engage the religious sector in peace building must be continuously promoted.

- **Involvement of the youth**

It has become a normal practice that when there is conflict, community leaders and government security personnel are called in to solve the issue. This approach has not always worked because the issues of violence are still persisting. Obviously, those who tend to incite conflicts are the youths. Thus, to address these issues of violence, one possible way would be to involve the youth as peace makers. Young people have the opportunity to be powerful agents of change. However, as they navigate the difficult transition from adolescence to adulthood, they can be tempted by external parties or ideologies and influenced by corruption, high unemployment rates, and discrimination, which can draw them into violent extremism or election violence. Training youth leaders on prejudice awareness, effective leadership, and conflict management, would be an effective way for youths to be diverted away from and engage in addressing violence at the community level.

### Conclusion and recommendations

Violent incidences affect the security and safety of people living in communities. It has cost human lives and misery, insecurity and threats of violence, has undermined social cohesion and economic development projects, and hindered delivery of essential public services. It is now a serious concern that government at all levels including churches and donor partners need to address. To build peace in communities, churches can advocate for peace and break the culture of silence about violence in homes, communities and society. Churches can work together to advocate for tolerance, non-violence and mutual respect.

It is possible that our Christian leaders can do this with ecumenical support because churches work well with communities and their work is more effective in finding lasting solutions. The government should consider working closely with them to find lasting peace in conflict ridden communities. Furthermore, churches can help build the culture of peace by helping communities know how to

prevent conflicts and transform mindsets. In this way, they can empower marginalised people, both men and women in society to be peacemakers, support non-violent movements for justice and human rights, offer support to those who have suffered the impacts of intergroup violence, and give peace education within churches and schools.

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