

# Papua New Guinea riots expose mounting social tensions

Will Morrow

16 November 2011

Violent rioting engulfed Papua New Guinea's second largest city, Lae, between November 3-6, leaving nine people dead and more than 20 injured.

More than 1,000 young people reportedly began to riot after Luther Wenge, the governor of the eastern province of Morobe, ignored a petition complaining about crime linked to squatter settlements in Lae, the capital of Morobe that has a population of more than 150,000. The petition called on the government to outlaw street vendors and move a major bus stop from Eriku, an impoverished area where robberies and sexual assaults were reportedly frequent. An alleged rape of a 13-year-old girl sparked enormous anger.

Youth reportedly threw stones at government buildings and clashed with police. Over the weekend there were reports of violence directed at the city's squatter population, and more than 1,000 shanty-town homes were burnt down. Most of the homeless are now sleeping on the city outskirts near a government military facility. Papua New Guinea (PNG) police media director Domenic Kakas told AAP: "They have no houses. They have makeshift tents, no drinking water, no food."

PNG's *Post-Courier* described Lae as a "ghost town" after the riots. The city's schools were shut down for a week, affecting about 10,000 students.

Details of the authorities' response are unclear, but what little information has emerged points to fierce police repression. An official "fighting zone"—usually reserved for inter-tribal conflicts in PNG's Highlands—was declared in the city, allowing police to arrest anybody they wanted, without cause. An extra 120 police officers, on top of the city's 270, were brought in from elsewhere in the country. Radio New Zealand reported that police used "tear gas and guns on thousands of rioters". According to the ABC, at least

one man was shot and killed by police, who claimed he was threatening them with a homemade gun.

The violence is an expression of the extreme poverty that wracks the former Australian colony.

More than 80 percent of the country's population of 6.6 million live in rural areas, but the urbanisation rate is rapidly growing as increasing numbers of young people migrate to the city each year in search of work and a life not dependent on subsistence farming. With few job opportunities and chronic housing shortages, however, squatter settlements of unemployed people have grown throughout PNG's urban areas. Ensuing social tensions have intersected with communal tensions between PNG's many different tribal and language groups. In Lae, local youths reportedly blamed Highlanders for incidents of crime.

PNG has recorded relatively high economic growth over the past seven years, due to rising commodity export prices, but few ordinary people have benefitted. The country's UN Human Development Index ranking has fallen from 137th to 153rd in the last two years, and is now in the lowest possible category of human development, one spot above Yemen.

Henry Chow, director of the National Research Institute of Papua New Guinea, pointed to the near absence of government services in rural areas. "The so-called rural health centres, clinics, are not functioning, or abandoned or without clinic attendance or drugs," he explained. "This situation has been brewing for quite some time, not only in the city of Lae. I believe this same situation is spreading all over this country due to the rapid paces of change which have been happening in PNG for the past few years." He added that of the 200,000 school-leavers in the country each year, "less than ten percent can find formal employment in the urban centres [and] the balance are thrown into the

streets or are forced to return to the rural areas”.

These facts are a damning indictment of so-called Australian government “aid” projects in PNG. The country is Australia’s second largest recipient, with just over \$450 million provided in 2010. Far from providing significant humanitarian relief, however, so-called aid money is directed towards purchasing diplomatic and political influence in Port Moresby.

Australian ruling circles are utterly indifferent to the social crisis in PNG. Their preoccupation with the Lae riots was over the potential implications for the extraction of PNG’s vast natural resources, above all liquid natural gas (LNG). Lae has PNG’s largest port facilities. An article in the Murdoch-owned *Australian*, “Riots rock Papua New Guinea mining boom”, declared that the riots “raise questions about the country’s capacity to sustain its massive mining, oil and gas boom.” The article pointed out that Highlands Highway, which stretches from Lae to major gas fields in the Highlands, “provides crucial infrastructure for some of the country’s biggest new resource ventures, including the \$16.5 billion ExxonMobil liquefied natural gas project under construction.”

Prime Minister Peter O’Neill rushed to issue assurances, threatening to declare a state of emergency in the region to avert business disruptions. He declared: “Lae’s port provides a vital link for businesses in many parts of the country. A shutdown will not only cripple businesses, but will affect the whole economy. We cannot allow this.”

The ExxonMobil-led LNG project—involving an international consortium that includes the Australian company Interoil—is expected to provide \$30 billion in government revenue over the next three decades. The mining companies will glean far more, with \$95 to \$125 billion expected in accrued gas revenues over the life of the project, depending on gas prices. PNG’s annual gross domestic product is forecast to double once the exports commence, but the capital-intensive development provides few jobs for local people. The extremely uneven character of the country’s economic development is fuelling social inequality and resentments among unemployed youth.

ExxonMobil’s investment is by far the largest single US investment in the South Pacific, and is the first of several major gas projects being developed in PNG, which is expected to become one of Asia’s major LNG

exporters within a decade.

This economic development has elevated PNG’s geo-strategic significance, amid heightened rivalries between US and China throughout the South Pacific. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton addressed the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations earlier this year and pointedly raised the ExxonMobil LNG project in PNG, declaring: “Let’s put aside the moral, humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in, and let’s just talk, you know, straight *Realpolitik*. We are in a competition with China. Take Papua New Guinea... China is in there every day in every way trying to figure out how it’s going to come in behind us, come in under us.”



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**