

Papua New Guinea: Dozens dead and missing in landslide

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Dozens are missing and dead following a landslide in a remote area of Papua New Guinea's Southern Highlands province. Tuesday's landslide affected an area a kilometre long, and hundreds of metres wide, burying an entire village. Boulders the size of cars destroyed home-made village dwellings.

The PNG National Disaster Office announced on Wednesday that 40 bodies had been recovered, with at least 20 more people missing. Local media reports, however indicate that the number killed could be as high as 100. Some reports said one village was buried; others suggested that two villages were subsumed by the mud.

Nanduka Yandi, an aid worker, told the *Telegraph* that the landslide "covered 42 houses and only three or four people managed to escape. Everyone else died." He added: "It is quite remote, and yesterday there was hardly anyone to dig the bodies or help people. People lost their entire families. They are in shock." He described a scene of "utter devastation" and said the landslide "destroyed the whole area."

It is believed that a number of the victims are children. Thousands of people gathered at the site of the landslide, covering their faces with mud in a traditional display of mourning.

The landslide occurred near a massive liquefied natural gas (LNG) project owned by a consortium led by Exxon-Mobil. Quarrying and construction is proceeding in preparation for the extraction of gas, beginning in 2014. The project is forecast to provide \$30 billion in government revenues over the next three decades. The mining companies expect to accrue far

more, with revenues over the project's lifetime estimated at between \$95 and \$125 billion, depending on gas prices.

While heavy rain and geological instability may have contributed to the tragedy, local residents and government officials indicated they believe the project, which is operated by Esson Highlands Ltd., a subsidiary of Exxon-Mobil, bears some responsibility.

Martin Mose, the acting director of PNG's disaster office, confirmed that quarrying had been taking place at a site just above the village. He told Radio New Zealand International: "They had been digging limestone for gravel and things like that and that's actually where the landslide may have occurred from. That seems to be the most probable rationale..."

Locals said blasts from the quarry had destabilised the ground in the past. However, Exxon-Mobil issued denials, claiming that the quarry located near the village had not been in use for six months.

PNG's National Weather Service issued a warning at the beginning of January that a protracted wet season had exacerbated the danger of flooding, tropical cyclones and landslides.

Despite the dangers, there is no indication that any level of government was prepared for the disaster. The rescue operations appear to be chaotic, with rescue workers having difficulty accessing the site for days due to continuing rain and fears of further landslides.

Exxon-Mobil's response to the disaster demonstrates its contempt for the impoverished villagers who live

near the gas project. The company resumed work within days of the landslide, with victims still buried beneath the mud. No investigation has begun into the possible contribution of quarrying to the disaster. A company spokesperson announced that its staff had been accounted for, and reassured investors that the landslide would not affect the project's scheduled completion in 2014.

Santos, an Australian mining giant, and a partner in the LNG project, has been involved in similar incidents elsewhere. Santos was a partner in an Indonesian gas exploration project that, through negligent drilling, unleashed mud flows in 2006 that have engulfed large areas in Sidoarjo, Java and affected thousands of people.

Exxon-Mobil's project provides few benefits for local villagers. Only 1,500 jobs have been allocated to PNG workers in the construction phase of the project, and just 850 workers will be hired when production commences in 2014. PNG has some of the highest poverty levels in the Pacific region. Around 40 percent of the population live on less than \$1 a day, and 85 percent of people depend on the informal economy to survive.

The PNG political establishment is entirely beholden to the major corporate and financial interests that control companies like Exxon-Mobil. Francis Potape, the local parliamentarian for the affected area, was uncritical of the project even though, as he told ABC Radio Australia: "I think more of these sorts of landslides will occur, because of those blasting of quarries and of course the amount of work going on..." He exhorted locals to focus on the recovery, telling them "later we can then talk about what caused the accident"—that is, at some undefined time in the distant future.

Prime Minister Peter O'Neill reportedly promised an independent investigation into the causes of the landslide, and the relocation of those affected. A government inquiry will in all likelihood cover up any Exxon-Mobil responsibility for the disaster, in order to protect the revenue expected from the LNG project. The circumstances surrounding the landslide

demonstrate that the prime concern of the company and the government is profit, not the safety of local villagers.



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