

Massacre of 17 prison escapees highlights deep social crisis in Papua New Guinea

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On May 12, seventeen prisoners were shot dead by police and prison guards, after 77 inmates escaped Buimo jail's main compound near Lae, the second largest city in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The incident is the latest demonstration of a mounting social crisis within the Pacific Island nation and the ever-greater resort to deadly force and repression by the country's ruling elite and state apparatus.

The jailbreak was the fourth mass escape to occur since 2014 at Buimo prison, one of the largest in PNG. In February last year, 94 inmates were involved. Police indiscriminately opened fire on the escapees, killing 12 and wounding 18. In 2015, fifty-five men escaped, while in 2014, one detainee was shot dead when 44 made a break from the facility.

The Lae police department is conducting an operation to re-capture those prisoners still at large. Police Chief Wagambie bluntly declared that any associates or family members who were caught harbouring the escapees would be arrested and charged. In a threat that the men risked being shot and killed, Wagambie declared: "I am warning them that they will be caught. They must do what is good for them and surrender."

Correctional services commissioner Michael Waipo admitted that Buimo could only safely house 500 prisoners, while currently holding 900. The facility is also severely understaffed, Waipo said. Due to a freeze on recruitment, the ratio between staff and detainees, "instead of one to three, it is one to one hundred in a shift."

According to the US state department, in its Country Reports for Human Rights in Papua New Guinea, 70 percent of those held at Buimo are on remand, denied bail and condemned to confinement before proven innocent or guilty. Some of those who escaped from detention in 2016 had been waiting nearly a decade to

face trial.

The report labelled prison conditions "very poor" and "seriously underfunded." It declared Buimo had "inadequate medical facilities and was overcrowded," noting that PNG's prisons were "designed to accommodate 4,166 inmates, but as of October (2016) they held 4,945 inmates."

Highlighting the dire conditions in jails across the country, prisoners at the Baisu jail in Mount Hagen, Western Highlands Province, were deprived of food for at least five days in February, because Correctional Services had not paid suppliers. A report also pointed out that the full nature of conditions in PNG's prison system could not be investigated because of the "Ombudsman Commission's" lack of "adequate resources to effectively monitor and investigate prison conditions."

In response to the actions by state officials, the Australian head of Human Rights Watch, Elaine Pearson, told the *Guardian* that "Papua New Guinea authorities don't have a licence to kill." In reality, they effectively do. Incident after incident has taken place, in which PNG police or army personnel have used deadly force in response to expressions of discontent and anger over inequality, official political corruption and appalling social conditions.

In June last year, police opened fire on a peaceful march by university students in Port Moresby to the parliament house, injuring at least 23. Notwithstanding the clear abuse of human rights, no officers responsible for this act, or for the massacres of prisoners, have faced charges.

State repression in PNG is aimed not only at protecting the corrupt local ruling elite. PNG became nominally independent from Australian colonial rule in 1975. US and Australian-based banks and

conglomerates, however, still dominate major aspects of the country's economic and social life. PNG's military and police are funded through Australian government grants, and trained and advised by Australian forces.

Companies such as Newcrest and ExxonMobil operate lucrative mining and gas ventures, looting the country's resources for the profits of transnational investors, at the direct expense of working people and the rural poor.

Newcrest operates PNG's Lihir mine, one of the biggest gold mines in the world. It has extracted an estimated 10 million ounces of gold over the past 20 years. Local landowners have protested over the fact that next to no benefit has flowed to them from this vast wealth.

ExxonMobil has directed major investment into opening-up PNG's vast natural gas reserves, bringing with it an ever greater interest in the country on the part of Washington. US concerns were candidly spelled out by former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who declared in 2011 that "we are in competition with China... ExxonMobil is producing it [natural gas]. 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."

The appointment of Rex Tillerson as US Secretary of State, ExxonMobil's former chairman, was welcomed by PNG Prime Minister Peter O'Neill, who declared him to be a "very good and genuine friend."

Last December, the relationship between corporate interests and the PNG state was demonstrated by the deployment of the military into Hela Province, to protect ExxonMobil's gas operations from angry villagers. Troops have intimidated the local opposition, to prevent disruption to the company's profit interests.

While the corporations amass huge profits, nearly 40 percent of PNG's population lives in poverty, subsisting on less than \$US1.25 a day. The country has one of the highest rates of maternal death in the world, second only to Afghanistan in the Asia-Pacific region. According to *OSAC's 2016 Crime and Safety Report*, nearly half the population lived in squatter settlements, and illiteracy is rampant, particularly among women.

Papua New Guinea has the highest percentage of its population in the world—60 percent—living without access to safe water. In 2016, a particularly harsh El-

Nino left 2.7 million people with water shortages, food insecurity and susceptible to disease. Inadequate social infrastructure has seen an epidemic of malaria and HIV/AIDS.

The youth who move from rural villages to the towns and cities, seeking paid work, face endemic levels of unemployment. As a result, PNG also has one of the highest crime rates in the world.

And conditions are only worsening. The collapse in global commodity prices has hit PNG particularly hard; economic growth plunged from 13.3 percent in 2014 to 2.5 percent in this financial year. The austerity package imposed through the O'Neill government's supplementary budget has devastated government programs and essential services. Public servants now receive little to no payments, while health and education funding has been gutted by 40 percent and 23 percent respectively.

The gunning down of desperate inmates by police and prison officials should raise immense political concern among workers in PNG and internationally. It is of a piece with the brutal state violence unleashed by governments internationally, in order to defend the interests of finance capital and the local elites.

The massacre took place amid the campaign for the coming PNG election, with polls due to open on June 24. Regardless of which coalition of establishment political parties ultimately forms government, it will carry out the dictates of the international banks and corporations, intensifying austerity measures and state repression against the working class and rural masses.

The critical question in PNG, as across the South Pacific, is a turn by the most serious layers of students and workers to a serious study of the history, program and perspective of socialist internationalism, and the fight to build sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement.



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