

Emergency declared after earthquake devastates Papua New Guinea

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3 March 2018

Papua New Guinea (PNG) Prime Minister Peter O'Neill on Thursday declared a state of emergency for four highlands provinces hit by a 7.5-earthquake on Monday. O'Neill's government had already sent troops into the mineral-rich region.

More than 50 people are feared to have died, mostly as a result of landslides and mudslides that have destroyed villages, crops and roads. But no accurate estimate is possible because, despite the emergency declaration, basic relief supplies are yet to reach most affected areas.

While claiming to be making an "appropriate response" to an "unprecedented disaster" in the Hela, Southern Highlands, Western and Enga Provinces, O'Neill's emergency declaration is driven by fears of unrest in the region, where opposition has erupted in the past to the mining companies' destructive activities.

Anger is mounting over the lack of government assistance. Euralia Tagobe, who lives in the town nearest the epicentre, Tari, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "People are very, very upset because we didn't have our members (MPs) on the ground as soon as possible."

EMTV journalist Scott Waide told Fairfax Media he had collected verified reports of 31 deaths, but warned: "The truth is, we don't really know." Provincial hospitals are reportedly swamped with casualties, with surgeons in Tari operating without power and using lights from mobile phones.

Video taken from a helicopter shows the dense green canopy of forests torn open by massive landslides. Rivers of earth have engulfed waterways that thousands of village people rely on for drinking, washing and cooking.

Pictures show collapsed buildings in Mendi and residents using shovels to clear away landslides. The

damage left those injured in villages unable to reach the town's hospital, Wendy Tinaik, assistant to the hospital's director, told a journalist.

A Tari resident, Isaac Bulube, told Radio New Zealand: "There's a lot of residents' places totally destroyed, and some entire families don't have a house to live in. Most of the schools, their buildings have gone down; a lot of cracks on the roads, even Tari airport has a crack on the runway, making it impossible for planes to land. There's a lot of destruction."

By contrast to the situation facing villagers, the companies conducting the region's huge mining operations rapidly evacuated their expatriate personnel at the ExxonMobil liquefied natural gas (LNG) project, the Australian-based oil and gas explorer Oil Search's operations, and the Ok Tedi and Porgera gold, silver and copper mines.

The quake was centered close to ExxonMobil's \$20 billion project, PNG's largest commercial venture and main source of revenue. Hela NGO worker, Moses Komengi, said local people were particularly confused and fearful when they saw ExxonMobil moving its staff out of the area so quickly.

"We can see the police and the company moving out in choppers," Komengi told the media. "And ExxonMobil is evacuating all its personnel and employees out of the gas sites. So this is raising the question for the people, why is this happening?"

PNG Red Cross secretary-general Uvenama Rova, said anxiety had grown as people in Hela experienced aftershocks every hour. "People fear the gas might explode," he said.

Earthquakes are common in PNG, which sits on the so-called Pacific Ring of Fire. But despite the vast wealth extracted by these companies, successive governments have done little to protect the population

in the poverty-stricken country, which was an Australian colony until 1975.

Along with O'Neill's government, the official Australian response was also pitiful and slow. So far, the Australian government is to send just \$200,000 worth of aid, including tarpaulins, water purification tablets and water containers. An airforce Hercules aircraft is conducting aerial surveillance and providing "logistical support" to the PNG military.

O'Neill said the earthquake damage would total hundreds of millions of kina. "We don't have that kind of money," he declared. "But we will try and manage the situation as best as possible through the limitations of budgets we have." He said he could "assure" people in the four provinces "that we will be giving them our top priority in the coming weeks."

The truth is that the government's only concern is to suppress discontent and protect the mining operations. Just last August, O'Neill's government deployed additional heavily-armed troops and police personnel to Highland provinces as part of a broader crackdown on widespread social and political opposition, which intensified following July's national election. The polling was dominated by accusations that O'Neill's Peoples National Congress engaged in dubious electoral practices, including outright fraud, in order to cling to office.

Facing a budget crisis, aggravated by a slump in global prices for mining commodities, O'Neill's government slashed health and education spending by up to 40 percent for the 2016–17 financial year, intensifying the destitution and lack of essential services left by decades of Australian colonial rule.

According to UN figures, 39 percent of PNG's people live below the poverty line of \$US1.90 a day and 66.5 percent of workers earn less than \$3.10 a day. Despite the billions of dollars in profits being pumped out of the country, as of 2012, only 18 percent of the population had access to electricity, only 40 percent to clean water and 19 percent to proper sanitation.

O'Neill's other preoccupation is with satisfying the requirements of the US, Australia and other Western powers that supported his seizure of power in 2011, when he ousted his predecessor Michael Somare, who adopted a "look north" policy, oriented to China. The highlands mining projects are a key aspect in the strategic importance of PNG.

In late 2010, Hillary Clinton, then the Obama administration's secretary of state, visited PNG to reinforce US interests. Earlier that year she referred specifically to the ExxonMobil project and accused China of trying to "come in behind us, come in under us" in PNG.

Addressing the US congressional Foreign Relations Committee, she stated: "Let's put aside the moral, humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in and let's just talk straight, real politic. We are in a competition with China. Take Papua New Guinea—huge energy find." Clinton vowed that the US would not retreat from "the maintenance of our leadership in a world where we are competing with China."

This conflict is only intensifying. China's acting ambassador to PNG, Yau Min, this week highlighted the growth of Chinese investment and trade. "Especially in the area of economic cooperation our two countries trade volume reached \$US2.8 billion in the year 2017," he said.

Yau said the growth was in line with President Xi Jinping's One Belt, One Road infrastructure initiative to link Asia with Europe. China would support its state-owned enterprises and Chinese-owned companies like Sinohydro Power to help build infrastructure in PNG such as airports, bridges, roads, schools and warehouses.



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