

Rising anger over aid delays in Papua New Guinea's catastrophic quake disaster

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Unrest is growing in Papua New Guinea's highlands provinces over the inadequate official response to the massive human and environmental disaster created after a magnitude-7.5 earthquake hit the region on February 26.

The full extent of the catastrophe is still unknown. However, the documented death toll already exceeds 100 and hundreds of thousands of largely impoverished people are in desperate need of food, water, shelter and other assistance.

The quake was the biggest in PNG for 100 years, according to seismologists. There have been more than 100 aftershocks, including a 6.8-magnitude tremor on March 7. Mountain sides have collapsed, rivers have been filled by landslides, and roads, bridges and airports have been destroyed or damaged. In remote areas, whole villages have disappeared under landslides.

A BBC report on March 10 noted that nearly two weeks after the February 26 quake, PNG officials still did not know the damage and casualties in the worst-affected areas. UNICEF worker Karen Allen said that of the half million people affected in the provinces of Hela, Southern Highlands, Western and Enga, 275,000 were in need of urgent aid, and 300,000 were without shelter.

Allen said there were real concerns about diseases breaking out as unvaccinated children are brought together in poorly maintained camps. About 16 percent of PNG children were already acutely malnourished, she said, while only a fifth had access to a toilet.

Scott Waide, deputy editor at local news organisation EMTV, spoke to the BBC after visiting an informal camp in a village called Huiya, on the border of Hela and Southern Highlands provinces. More than 2,000 people had gathered there.

"They call it a care centre—it's offering support but there's very little food and water," Waide said. "When people get a mobile phone signal they are sending texts to the authorities saying: 'We have 2,000 people here and no food or water—can you send help?'"

People who have watched as oil and gas companies rapidly built up their industrial infrastructure over recent years asked why the same speed was not being applied to provide aid. Waide reported: "At the airfield when we flew in, people were waiting outside the fence asking: 'Why are we not seeing aircraft landing with supplies? Why are we not seeing people being evacuated to Tari?'"

By Friday just over 100 people had been identified as having been killed. But officials could not say if anyone had survived in isolated mountain areas, where homes were built on stilts and all have collapsed.

Many of these areas have never had road connections. Now even the jungle tracks have been wiped out, forcing survivors to trek with children and belongings over very difficult terrain, under constant fear of further aftershocks.

They are heading toward towns and small hospitals that are already overwhelmed. As of the middle of last week, Tari, the largest town in Hela province, had received no new supplies of food or medicine because of the damaged roads and airport, according to provincial Governor Philip Undialu. Before the quake the small town only had three doctors.

An article in the *Guardian* on March 8 described villagers in Hela province, where landslides have buried whole villages, attempting to recover bodies and injured people with the use of machetes, spades and bare hands. Their former food gardens, one villager said, were "now a grave site."

Anger is widespread over the government's slowness

in the relief effort and the lack of information reaching people in desperate need. The disaster relief agency has proven to be totally unprepared for such a crisis, despite PNG sitting on the unstable seismic Pacific Ring of Fire and having a long history of earthquakes.

Prime Minister Peter O’Neill has warned there will be “no quick fix” and the damage will take “months and years to be repaired.” He declared a state of emergency in the four highlands provinces in order to deploy police and the army to deal with any unrest. In the past, discontent has often erupted over the rapacious operations of the mining, oil and gas companies in the drive for profits.

The operators of the \$20 billion LNG gas project in the quake area—the American giant ExxonMobil—as well as the Australian-based Oil Search and Santos corporations, have assured their shareholders that the gas and profits should be flowing again within eight weeks. ExxonMobil managing director Andrew Barry said the company’s safety infrastructure and mobilisation of technical experts had prevented major damage.

For public relations purposes, the corporations announced humanitarian aid—\$US1 million from ExxonMobil, \$5 million from Oil Search and \$A200,000 from Santos. These are paltry sums compared to the human need, and to the billions of dollars these companies have extracted from the country, while leaving it improvised and unable to cope with any disaster.

Just a few days before the quake, ExxonMobil announced a deal with the French firm Total to spend \$13 billion on an expansion of the LNG operation to double its capacity and profits.

The Australian ruling class bears most responsibility for the inadequate response to the quake disaster. PNG was an Australian colony until 1975 and since then Canberra has constantly intervened in the country to ensure that international and Australian companies are able to exploit PNG’s natural wealth.

The indifference to the suffering created by the earthquake was expressed in the Australian government’s initial grant of \$A200,000 to the relief effort. After the China-PNG Friendship Association donated over \$500,000, Australian Foreign Minister Bishop announced that Australian aid would be increased, to just over \$1 million.

Canberra and Washington have waged a determined campaign to block China’s political and economic influence in PNG and the rest of the Asia-Pacific, especially since 2011. Australia supported O’Neill’s installation as prime minister in 2011 after his predecessor Michael Somare adopted a “look north” policy to seek Chinese aid and investment.



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