

# State of emergency declared following unrest in Papua New Guinea

John Braddock  
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The Papua New Guinea government has suspended the Southern Highlands provincial government and declared a nine-month state of emergency in the remote province. The Defence Force was called out to reinforce a heavy police presence, and a 6pm–6am curfew, imposed following an eruption of unrest in Mendi, the provincial capital, on June 14.

The government of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill approved \$US1.8 million in funding to enable the police-military mobilisation. A former policeman and acting provincial administrator, Thomas Eluh, has been given broad emergency powers. According to media outlet Loop PNG, more than 200 armed troops were flown to the area last weekend. Two mobile police squads of nearly 70 personnel are already there, with more due to be dispatched.

Armed crowds, angered over a court ruling upholding Southern Highlands governor William Powi's 2017 election win, burned an Air Niugini Dash-8 aircraft, looted a warehouse and torched buildings last week. The losing candidate, Joseph Kobol, alleges that the election was rigged.

Radio NZ Pacific reporter Melvin Levongo said people were "very frustrated" at the court result. "They said they blamed the judiciary system ... [that] it's compromised, and it was clearly a corrupt way that Mr Powi won his election, but the court didn't go [their] way so it was a rebellion against a corrupt governor, that's what most people said," he explained.

One witness said that Kobol's supporters, including between 100 and 200 men armed with sticks and guns, arrived from surrounding villages in flatbed trucks. They set fire to the plane before moving into the township, setting ablaze houses and two court buildings. The *Guardian* reported that the protests escalated over the weekend as up to 400 people armed

with machetes and guns marched on Mendi, calling for O'Neill's resignation.

During the disturbances, looters ransacked a warehouse with relief supplies that have been long-delayed following February's devastating 7.5-magnitude earthquake. Barclay Tenza, a spokesman for the provincial disaster relief said all the foodstuffs were taken. Eighteen UN staff providing earthquake relief were relocated from Mendi.

Nobody has been hurt or killed. However, supporters of Powi and his suspended government were said to be mobilising around the province with high-powered weapons. Radio NZ reported the local police commander Gideon Kauke as saying the potential for unrest remained acute. "This is not a normal law and order situation. It is political differences and politically manipulated issues that are causing all the destruction," he declared.

Martyn Namorong, a Port Moresby-based writer, told the *Guardian* people in Mendi he had spoken to described the mood as "calm but tense," while adding "there is a risk of civil war in which rival parties fight each other and against the security forces."

O'Neill denounced those involved. "The actions of reckless individuals damaging property in Mendi has disgusted the nation ... There is no place in politics for this type of behaviour, and leaders involved with this activity will be held to account," he cynically declared.

The parliamentary opposition demanded that O'Neill, who is a Southern Highlands MP, resign over the unrest. According to opposition leader Patrick Pruaitch, the unrest was "bad publicity" for PNG as it prepares to host the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November.

Violence regularly erupts in the interior Highlands region of the impoverished Pacific nation, where tribal

and land disputes intersect regional politics. However, there has been an upsurge in social unrest since the election 12 months ago. O'Neill's government is widely regarded as illegitimate. He won a second five-year term in an undemocratic and disputed poll, with a significantly decreased majority.

The election was mired in bribery and corruption, ballot rigging and the wholesale omission of names from the electoral roll. It exposed the utter contempt of the O'Neill government and the opposition parties for basic democratic and social rights. Protests erupted over accusations that vote counting was hijacked.

The ongoing turmoil is an expression of the explosive social tensions produced by austerity policies imposed by the O'Neill government in response to the economic crisis, including the collapse in global energy prices. In response to protests by students and workers, the government has increasingly turned to police-state measures.

While a tiny elite layer enriches itself on the crumbs from the profits of transnational miners, the vast majority of the population lives in abject poverty and economic backwardness. In May, dozens of prisoners were sent out from Wewak's Boram Prison to forage for food after two months of severe shortages. The prison had previously received 56,000 kina (\$US18,000) a month for its 290 inmates, but this had been cut to 24,000 kina.

On the heels of the Southern Highlands unrest, a popular revolt has again erupted in nearby Hela Province. On Tuesday landowners, frustrated at continued delays in payment of royalties by the government, blocked a main road and damaged equipment belonging to ExxonMobil's \$US19 billion LNG gas project. Radio NZ reported that a large airfield used by the project was also blockaded.

Landowners have been waiting years for their royalties, levies and dividends from the project. In February last year, more than 1,000 protesters gathered at the ExxonMobil site to demand the payments, estimated at over 1 billion kina (\$US256 million). In August 2016, landowners blockaded the entrance to the plant and disrupted gas supplies. In response, the government last year mobilised the police and military against local villagers.

There is deepening nervousness in ruling circles over the deteriorating situation ahead of the forthcoming

APEC meeting being held in PNG. O'Neill delayed a planned state visit to China on Wednesday in order to visit Mendi. Justin Tkatchenko, the country's minister for APEC, told local media last week's unrest would not affect plans for the summit, which is due to be attended by US President Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

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