

Landslide in Papua New Guinea kills 15 gold miners, children

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A landslide in Papua New Guinea's Central Province buried alive 15 people, including 3 children, on December 28.

The horrific incident occurred between 4 and 5 a.m. Heavy rains triggered a large movement of mud, trees and logs which engulfed a makeshift long hut at the base of a hill. Makeshift rescue efforts were unsuccessful, after people attempted to dig through the mud using only shovels and sticks.

News of the disaster took more than a day to emerge due to the remoteness and inaccessibility of Saki village, in Central Province's Goilala District. With no mobile phone coverage and no roads, access requires a helicopter trip or a two hour walk. The area is only around 100 kilometres north of the country's capital Port Moresby—the lack of basic transport and communication infrastructure reflects the enormous poverty in the former Australian colony.

Local authorities have organised helicopter lifts for supplies, including digging equipment, floodlights and food.

The landslide ruined villagers' food gardens. Takeso Fona, leader of an emergency committee formed by local residents to support landslide survivors, told the *National*: "What are we going to do? We can grow new food crops but between now and when it is ready for harvest, we would have starved. We grew sugarcane, kaukau [sweet potato], banana and other produce that were to be harvested soon. Our children can survive for now with the food we currently have. But once it is finished, that will be a problem."

Efforts to recover all of the bodies have continued this week. Those killed were alluvial gold miners and their families, reportedly from nearby villages, Tolukuma, Sobu, Goura and Mondo. They had been panning and digging tunnels in the hillside, searching

for flecks of gold.

Local parliamentarian and government minister for transport and infrastructure, William Samb, visited the area after the landslide and blamed the victims for their plight. He told other miners: "You are cutting through the mountain side, cutting down trees that hold the ground together. You need to move to a safer location away from the cliffside. You cannot be digging through the mountain side, then build your home on top. It is dangerous."

These statements are an attempt to deflect scrutiny of the government's responsibility for the disaster.

Alluvial mining is legal and officially encouraged in Papua New Guinea. Mining licences are not required if people extract minerals on their own land by non-mechanical means. Estimates of the number of people involved in makeshift, individual gold mining efforts vary from 60,000 to more than 100,000. Some of those involved are children, who have to skip school to help their families.

Living in terrible conditions, the miners endure well documented health and safety risks. These include poisoning from mercury and cyanide, which are frequently used to separate gold from rock and earth.

Papua New Guinea is in the top 15 gold producing countries. Most of the gold is produced in enormous mines, including Ok Tedi (formerly owned by BHP Billiton and now nationalised), Lihir (owned by Australia's Newcrest Mining), and Porgera (co-owned by Canadian-based Barrick Gold and China's Zijin Mining).

Many of the mines have appalling environmental and human rights records, with company goons assaulting and murdering any local residents who oppose mining operations. Ok Tedi's Australian corporate owners are responsible for the country's worst ecological disaster.

In the interest of maximising profits, instead of constructing a dam to house poisonous waste water, for two decades the company dumped the waste directly into the Fly and Ok Tedi Rivers, ruining the river systems and surrounding land.

While Papua New Guinea's enormous mineral wealth has generated vast profits for transnational mining corporations, and personal wealth for a tiny layer of politicians and officials, ordinary people in the country remain among the world's most impoverished.

For tens of thousands of people, the desperate search for flecks of gold provides the only means of survival.

Alluvial mining produces nearly 4 tonnes of gold annually, approximately 5 percent of total production in the country. This provides an important taxation revenue stream that the government has encouraged.

In March last year, Mineral Resource Authority official Roger Gunson declared: "From the grassroots miners working the rivers and streams to boost their rural household income, through to the national government collecting taxes, the sector is one of the largest small and medium enterprise [sectors]."

Alluvial gold miners take their finds to regional towns where they are purchased by licensed gold dealers based in Port Moresby. Most of this is then sold on to the Perth Mint, in Western Australia. The state government-owned Perth Mint processes more than 90 per cent of Australia and Asia's gold production, equivalent to more than 10 percent of world gold production.

Last June, the *Australian Financial Review* published an exposé of Perth Mint's ties with Papua New Guinean gold dealers. The newspaper suggested that Mint executives had "repeatedly ignored staff concerns around purchases from small-scale gold miners in PNG, a practice heavily criticised for using child labour, degrading the environment through the use of mercury, and promoting conflict."

One of the gold dealing companies, Golden Valley, was owned by Justin Parker, an individual previously convicted of killing the company's helicopter engineer in June 2015. Golden Valley sold the Mint around 80,000 ounces of gold in 2019, worth some \$200 million. Golden Valley allegedly encouraged the use of child labour and traded gold for supplies of mercury, encouraging villagers on the island of Bougainville to use the toxic substance to extract more gold.

Australian Financial Review reportedThe "Mint insiders said buying from Mr Parker was highly profitable, as the margin from Golden Valley was 10 times higher compared to other corporate customers such as Newcrest or Lihir Gold."

Mint executives announced they would no longer process gold sourced from Papua New Guinean alluvial miners only after two of the world's largest banks, HSBC and JPMorgan, threatened to sever ties.

The broader exploitative relationship between world imperialism and Papua New Guinean gold miners remains unaltered, however. With tens of billions of dollars' worth of minerals and oil at stake, the lives of ordinary people in the impoverished country count for nothing within ruling circles internationally.



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