

Social discontent erupts in Papua New Guinea

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On Wednesday simmering social discontent, driven by escalating living costs, erupted into chaos, looting and arson in Papua New Guinea's (PNG) capital Port Moresby and elsewhere, after police and armed services personnel walked out and protested over persistent shortages in their pay.

Prime Minister James Marape has declared a 14-day state of emergency in the National Capital District, with 1,000 defence force personnel on standby "wherever necessary to contain any situations that may arise going forward into the future." PNG Defence Force soldiers and vehicles have been deployed on the streets of the capital.

The *Post Courier*, among others, said that the events marked "the darkest day" in Port Moresby's history. At least 16 people are reported dead and dozens injured after 24 hours of mayhem in the capital and the country's second city, Lae. Unverified videos have emerged of the bodies of men who were involved in the unrest allegedly shot dead. Women and children were wailing around them.

Buildings and shops were torched. PNG's fire chief officer said firefighters were outnumbered when trying to attend to fires. The Port Moresby General Hospital had to close overnight, eventually treating some 60 people for serious injuries. A smaller hospital at the Gerehu suburb evacuated its patients as a nearby shop was set on fire. The airport was closed with all international flights cancelled until further notice. By Thursday the unrest spread to several other provinces, including East New Britain and New Ireland.

Footage and images from the capital on social media show warehouses engulfed in flames and large crowds of people looting and rioting. The City Pharmacy Limited (CPL) group, which owns one of the biggest supermarket and pharmacy chains in Port Moresby had most of its shops raided and burned overnight. Looters also stole electronic appliances from warehouses and

shops owned by the Brian Bell group of companies.

The Australian High Commission issued a general warning that Australians in Port Moresby should monitor local media and avoid "trouble spots." It advised to pay close attention to personal security and follow heightened security measures.

An Australian citizen working in Port Moresby has sent the WSWWS a list of premises burned or looted. They include: Stop n Shop (SnS) Harbour city looted into the night, Desh Besh Kone wholesale premise looted and set on fire, EFM container yard at NapaNapa Laba market junction looted, Red Sea housing base Baruni in flames with a Filipino lady trapped inside, Renbo SnS burned and Koki, Badili, Gabutu and Kilakila shops owned by Asians looted with nine looters and several others killed.

Police reinforcements were flown in from Lae as the unrest continued for much of the day and into the night, defying repeated calls by Police Commissioner David Manning to clear the streets and go home. Manning said security forces would not tolerate "troublemakers" and live rounds could be used. The government also issued a call out for the military to assist police.

The events began on Wednesday morning local time, after about 200 police and military personnel gathered at the Ungai Oval to protest pay deductions of between \$US26-80 from their fortnightly pay—about half the take-home salary for some. A government minister who addressed them could not convince them why the deductions had been made. The tax office said the issue caused by a "glitch" in the accounting system which was being fixed.

Amid spreading rumours that the pay deduction were either deliberate or even a new tax, the protesters demanded an answer from the government, saying the "glitch" explanation was not satisfactory. They then moved from Unagi Oval to parliament house, opened the gates of parliament where Police Minister Peter

Siamali unsuccessfully tried to address them.

When security personnel withdrew their services, the situation quickly escalated. Marape went into lockdown at Manaspecc Haus which houses the Prime Minister's Department and other central government agencies. The protesters burned the guard house in front of the premises.

By Thursday calls for nationwide strikes were being raised. The PNG Nurses' Association issued a circular to its branches calling for urgent meetings to prepare for a national stop-work and sit-ins to protest what it described as an effective hike in public servants' income tax from 32 to 42 percent. The union declared that the unjustified increase came in the face of rising inflation that had "already put pressure on the basic food stuff sold in our stores and supermarkets."

At a press conference on Thursday, Marape claimed the riots had been "organised," without offering any evidence. He acknowledged that economic times were "tough" while declaring citizens should not take to the streets and "do anything and everything they feel." Ill-discipline in the police force and defence "will not be tolerated," he said.

Manning and senior bureaucrats in the finance and treasury departments have since been suspended while the government has promised to sort out the public servants' pay "anomaly" in the next fortnight.

Even if the claim of a "glitch" in the payroll system is true, the fact that the issue triggered such a social explosion is testimony to the extreme social tensions wracking the country. Living standards are deteriorating. Consumer price inflation, which averaged 5.1 percent in the ten years to 2022, was forecast by the Asia Development Bank (ADB) last September to continue at the same level through all of 2023 and 2024. GDP is expected to grow by only 2.6 percent in 2024.

Rich in natural resources, PNG is one of the world's most unequal countries. According to UNICEF, of an estimated population of 10.3 million, 85.7 percent live in generalised poverty. ADB data shows that 24.4 percent of those *employed* exist on \$US1.90 purchasing power per day.

With widespread anger over Marape's handling of the dispute, his government, which took office in September 2022, is facing a major crisis. Six government backbench MPs have already resigned.

Two, James Nomane and Kieth Iduhu made their resignations public via social media, blaming Marape for the riots and calling on him to resign.

A grace period preventing a vote of no confidence in Marape's leadership is due to expire next month. If a vote is triggered, a new prime minister could be elected from the floor of parliament. Marape has begun warning against ongoing instability, saying: "Our development partners are watching, our international partners are watching, our investors are watching."

The attitude of PNG's former colonial ruler, Australia, was spelled out in a threatening editorial in the *Australian* yesterday. It called the episode a "tragic lapse" for PNG and "a concern for regional security more broadly." After a passing reference to "respecting the sovereign wishes of PNG," it demanded the Albanese government "be ready to step in should we be asked to help maintain law and order." There is in fact a long history of Canberra interfering in the affairs of PNG, whether or not an "invitation" was issued.

The *Australian* further pointed to "worrying similarities" with the Solomon Islands in November 2021, when rioting spiralled into "a bigger security threat for Australia and our allies that stretched well beyond Honiara." Those events saw China send a police contingent to the Solomons to help restore order. Any repeat of China offering "security and protection" to another Pacific government would be an "unwelcome development" for Canberra. "The growing security ambitions China has regarding PNG are of great concern to the US and Australia," the warning concluded.

The social crisis facing the working class finds a particularly acute expression in PNG. The living conditions of the impoverished masses are driven down by the rapacious multi-national corporations, global financial institutions and their local political servants. At the same time, Australia, the US and the imperialist powers that dominate the Pacific are turning it into an arena for geo-strategic confrontation with China, further compounding the social disaster.



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