

At least 670 dead, two thousand buried alive in Papua New Guinea landslide

Patrick O'Connor
26 May 2024

A massive landslide in Papua New Guinea's central Enga province has killed at least 670 people, according to state officials, with the exact toll unlikely to be known for several days. The affected area is accessible on land by only one highway, a section of which was covered by rubble.

"The landslide buried more than 2,000 people alive and caused major destruction to buildings, food gardens and caused major impact on the economic lifeline of the country," Lusete Laso Mana, director of Papua New Guinea's National Disaster Centre, wrote in a letter to the United Nations.

The isolated rural Yambili village, with an estimated 4,000 residents, was almost entirely submerged by the landslide. Local reports indicate this may have been triggered by an earthquake, following extended heavy rains.

Photo and video reports show terrible scenes, with massive boulders and dense earth covering an estimated 600 homes. Part of a small mountain range sheared off, creating debris that initial emergency responders have estimated is up to eight metres deep, covering more than 200 square kilometres.

The Red Cross in Papua New Guinea reported that the emergency response at the site consisted of police, military, officials from the provincial governor's office, and local nongovernmental organisations.

The disaster struck at around 3 a.m. on Friday, when residents were sleeping.

Care Australia, a charity working in the area, issued a statement Saturday that with regard to the destroyed homes, "all the members of these households remain unaccounted for." It added that in addition to Yambili's 4,000 residents, more people may be affected after fleeing to the village from neighbouring areas hit by tribal violence.

UN official Serhan Aktoprak yesterday told the AFP news agency that only five bodies had been removed from the wreckage by Saturday night. In addition to destroyed homes, Aktoprak reported that a makeshift school and several trading stalls were buried. He explained that emergency rescue work was hampered by ongoing risks: "Working across the debris is very dangerous and the land is still sliding," he said.

Vincent Pyati, president of a local Community Development Association, told the *New York Times* that the affected area was "a transport node where many came from remote areas overnight to catch public motor vehicles, a popular method of transit, probably adding to the toll [...] there was also a drinking club popular with people from all over the district."

Papua New Guinea's tropical weather, mountainous terrain especially in its Highlands' region, and proximity to the earthquake-prone Pacific Ocean's "Ring of Fire," has triggered numerous incidents like the latest crisis in Enga province.

The landslide and its devastating impact cannot be understood, however, only in terms of it being another natural disaster. PNG was an Australian colony until 1975, and it remains dominated by the imperialist powers. Its lucrative natural resources, including oil and gas, gold and silver, and timber, are siphoned off by giant transnational corporations, while the population remains among the most impoverished in the world. Basic services including electricity, healthcare, and education are limited or nonexistent for the rural poor like those in Yambili.

The devastated village included residents who eked out a living through alluvial mining. This involves panning and manually digging for specks of gold, a dangerous process. Miners' health is frequently affected by the use of mercury and cyanide to separate

gold from rock and earth.

Alluvial mining has been encouraged by successive PNG governments, and produces an estimated 5 percent of the country's gold exports. The exploitative industry sees impoverished miners, some of them children, bear all the risk while a chain of commercial gold dealers reaps large profits. Most of the gold ends up in Australian vaults.

The Yambili landslide struck near the giant Porgera gold and silver mine that is co-owned by Canadian-based Barrick Gold (with a majority stake) and China's Zijin Mining.

The disaster has reportedly blocked an access road to the mine. A Barrick Gold spokesperson told Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) News that the extent of the damage was still being assessed. "We are supporting provincial authorities in their assessment and initial response efforts," they said. "Porgera currently has sufficient supplies at site to operate normally in the short term."

PNG Prime Minister James Marape has declared that his government was doing everything possible to provide "relief work, recovery of bodies, and reconstruction of infrastructure."

In fact, the government is responsible for the appalling conditions confronting PNG's working class and rural poor. Since taking office in September 2022, Marape, like his predecessors, has worked to advance the interests of transnational corporations and the domestic wealthy elite. His tenure has been marked by escalating social tensions, with frequent violent tribal clashes as well as rioting in the capital, Port Moresby, last January. Marape may lose office within weeks, as numbers of government parliamentarians are switching to the opposition ahead of a planned no-confidence motion.

The PNG government has closely aligned itself with US and Australian imperialism. Last year both powers signed sweeping military cooperation deals with the Pacific state, with Washington and Canberra seeking PNG's alignment with their aggressive preparations for a war against China. The US-PNG Defence Cooperation Agreement signed in May gives Washington "uninhibited access" to numerous locations, including the Manus Island naval base, which served as a vital deep-water American port during World War II.

Both Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and US President Joe Biden issued public pledges of sympathy and offers of assistance over the landslide disaster. Previous responses demonstrate, however, that help will be minimal and short-lived.

Nothing will be done to invest the necessary resources to protect rural communities in PNG from the impact of earthquakes and landslides.

The latter are now at least partly predictable. University of Sydney lecturer in geomechanics Benjy Marks explained in the *Conversation*: "Huge advancements have recently been made in remote sensing, so that planes and satellites can be used to extract this vital [geological] information. Using sophisticated sensors, they can see past foliage and map the ground surface in high resolution. As satellites orbit quite regularly, small changes in the surface topography can be monitored. Scientists hope that by using this information, unstable regions that haven't yet failed can be identified and monitored."

This data from planes and satellites, however, can only be gathered and interpreted if the necessary investments are made. That is unlikely to be provided either by the government, its imperialist backers or the giant mining corporations that have considerable resources devoted to sophisticated geological surveys.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact