

Aid delays in reaching thousands displaced by PNG landslide disaster

Peter Symonds
30 May 2024

Almost a week after a massive landslide buried a remote village in Papua New Guinea (PNG), few bodies have been recovered and little aid has reached the thousands of displaced villagers. There is the danger of further slippages and the risk of water-borne and other diseases.

The entire side of a mountain sheared away last Friday around 3 a.m., engulfing the village of Yambali in Enga province in mud, debris and huge boulders. Villagers have been working with picks and shovels in an effort to find survivors buried under an estimated eight metres of rubble.

The lack of aid, technical experts and heavy machinery reaching the stricken village is reflected in widely varying estimates of the number of dead, injured and displaced.

PNG's National Disaster Centre reportedly told the United Nations in a letter earlier in the week that more than 2,000 people were thought to have been buried alive by the landslide. The UN migration agency mission, to the country, had initially estimated the death toll at 670.

"Neither the UN nor government authorities have yet been able to verify numbers of casualties, although we are continuing to work with government on this," the UN Development Program's resident representative, Nicholas Booth, said in an email reported in the *Washington Post*.

Local councillor and Mulitaka Disaster Committee chairman Jaman Yandam told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that the death toll was just over 160. The figure was based on another head count conducted by village leaders of those who are missing and believed to be dead.

Yandam suggested that confused communications could have led to the far higher estimates. "Two

thousand is an estimate of people who had various injuries from the landslide," he said.

"The confusion is where it hit, because it's a pub [hotel] area with lots of people from other villages including illegal miners.

"The total confirmed dead from my local level government is 162. Since the landslide, seven bodies were retrieved... 155 are still buried underground," he added.

One source involved with the international response to disaster told the ABC that they did not believe that two or three thousand people could have been killed in the landslide but made clear that did not detract from the terrible impact of the disaster.

"Whatever the final figure, it's clear there has been very substantial loss of life and this is a terrible tragedy for Papua New Guinea," the source said. "The international community has a responsibility to respond and help."

Yet, the international aid being provided is very limited. The Australian government has provided a pittance of assistance in the form of 750 shelters and a 16-member disaster relief team. The team includes technical experts who will help to assess geo-hazards amid fears that the huge mounds of rocks and debris are unstable.

Australian Minister for International Development and the Pacific Pat Conroy told the ABC's "7.30" program: "They'll also be equipped with drones to map the site and identify, quite frankly, at this stage, more likely to be bodies rather than people living." He added: "We stand ready to move and build on the \$A2.5 million of assistance we've provided."

The United States has pledged about \$US506,800 for emergency shelter and logistics support, its embassy in Port Moresby said.

An estimated 7,900 people have been affected by the landslide, which has destroyed homes, fresh water supplies and the subsistence gardens on which villagers rely. Health experts are concerned that people drinking untreated drinking water or sewage-contaminated water could cause the outbreak of gastrointestinal illnesses, such as cholera. Standing water could breed mosquitoes and lead to mosquito-borne illnesses, particularly malaria.

What aid has actually reached the landslide site is unclear. Australia's High Commissioner to Papua New Guinea John Feakes said on Wednesday morning that the first Australian Defence Force flight to the disaster zone would carry relief supplies, including tarpaulins, household kits, water purification tablets, kitchen utensils and hygiene kits.

PNG's transport infrastructure is, however, rudimentary—the legacy of decades of Australian colonial rule. The main road to the highlands and Enga province, from Lae on the north coast, is poorly maintained and subject to landslides. No road connects the north coast to the capital of Port Moresby on the south coast.

Even if flown into the highlands town of Mount Hagen, supplies have to be trucked to the provincial capital of Wabag, then on to Yambali. The difficulties were further compounded by the collapse of a bridge on Tuesday evening connecting Enga to the rest of the highlands, adding two to three hours via an alternative road through the Southern Highlands.

A statement from the PNG Defence Force said it was “looking into engineering solutions to fix the bridge as soon as possible.” Five to ten heavy earth-moving machines were expected to be at the landslide site by Thursday, it stated. A team of 40 military engineers and medical staff reached Wabag on Tuesday and were due in Yambali yesterday.

The determination to clear the road is not just driven by the humanitarian disaster at Yambali but by the need for road access to the lucrative Porgera gold mine operated further along the road from Wabag. The mine is operated by Barrick Gold through Barrick Niugini Ltd.—a joint venture with China's Zijin Mining.

Days after the disaster struck, PNG Prime Minister James Marape made his first comments on the tragedy in a statement to parliament yesterday. He blamed “extraordinary rainfall” and changes to weather

patterns for multiple disasters, including the landslide. “Nature threw a disastrous landslip, submerged or covered the village,” Marape said, in calling for a minute's silence.

The disaster, however, is not simply a natural disaster. It is the result of chronic underfunding of essential physical and social infrastructure, particularly health care, even as giant mining corporations such as Barrick make super profits. Around 40 percent of PNG's population lives below the extreme poverty line and access to health and educational facilities is very limited in rural areas such as Yambali.

Marape reassured parliament that his government was working with Barrick to reopen the road as soon as possible so supplies could reach the mine.

The *Washington Post* reported the comments of Kate Allstadt, a research geophysicist who studies natural hazards for the US Geological Survey. She noted that the huge landslide covers an area of about 915,000 square feet (85,000 square metres).

Significantly, based on an examination of satellite imagery from last year, Allstadt noted that the slope was unstable because of a previous landslide. Needless to say, no warning had been issued to the local villages.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact