

Rescue efforts end following Papua New Guinea landslide disaster

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Two weeks after the landslide disaster in Enga Province in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) highlands, the Provincial Administrator formally ended the search and recovery on Friday, June 7. Authorities stopped searching for bodies and the landslide area will be designated as a mass burial site with monuments erected.

Two days earlier the PNG government had ruled out finding more survivors and Armed Forces Major Joe Aku told media that the area was a “no-go zone,” deeming it unsafe due to the risk of contamination and disease. Some locals ignored warnings and continued their desperate search for victims.

The death toll, according to government figures, is 670, down from earlier estimates of over 2,000. On June 5, the *National* reported that only 11 bodies had been recovered, including two children. On May 29, chair of the Mulitaka Disaster Committee Jaman Yandam told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that more than 160 people had died, citing village leaders who had conducted a head count.

The final toll remains unclear and will never be fully known. The current figures are based largely on information by village and provincial officials. About 150 homes were totally buried. The average PNG household has between five and eight people, but one resident who survived said a dozen of her family members were buried.

The side of Mount Mungalo sheared away and fell at around 3 a.m. on May 24, almost entirely obliterating the village of Yambali under mud, debris and rubble 20 to 26 feet deep. Massive boulders and dense earth caused major destruction to buildings, a makeshift hotel, medical facility and food gardens. Over 4,000 people were immediately affected. The area is accessible by only one highway, a section of which was

covered by rubble.

Little aid reached the displaced villagers for the first week with officials blaming difficult terrain and tribal unrest. Such delays are in fact bound up with the lack of basic infrastructure, especially in PNG’s remote highlands region.

The Red Cross reported that the initial emergency response consisted of police, military, officials from the provincial governor’s office and local nongovernmental organisations. Helicopters carrying machinery and supplies began to arrive on May 29. World Vision said humanitarian aid groups began travelling to the site that same week and UNICEF was able to supply medical kits for about 1,000 people for three months plus sanitary products and food.

The Enga provincial government last week issued a 72-hour evacuation order for the surrounding area due to the risk of more earth movement. The UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) told the Associated Press that 7,847 people had been affected by the landslide and 1,650 were displaced.

The IOM’s PNG chief, Serhan Aktoprak, said, “Working across the debris is very dangerous and the land is still sliding.” He added: “People are coming to terms with this [the deaths and destruction] so there is a serious level of grieving and mourning.”

New Zealand geotechnical engineers sent to PNG released a report raising concerns about the instability of the ground. “We believe that there is real potential for further landslides to occur in the near or medium term,” Aaron Waterreus, leader of the Fire and Emergency NZ (FENZ) team, told a news conference.

FENZ geotechnical engineer Jan Kupec said the landslide, which covers about 35 acres, could continue to move for months or even years. He said the avalanche was likely part of an old landslide that had

been reactivated and there are concerns that coming monsoon rains will liquify the debris and reactivate the landslide again.

If correct, the comments raise serious questions about why a village of 4,000 people remained in an area of proven land instability and avalanche risks—and how many more are in equally precarious situations given the propensity of the vast PNG interior to landslides.

UN Humanitarian Affairs advisor Mate Bagossy said poor road conditions have cut off some surrounding villages, which are also in need of assistance. “It seems re-opening the road is not safe. So the back road will need to be opened. The original road could be declared a burial site,” Bagossy said.

Radio NZ (RNZ) reported that aid groups have expressed particular concern for pregnant women and children. “Women affected by the landslide tell us they have no spare clothes or food. It’s beginning to get very cold in the Highlands,” CARE program director PNG, Doreen Fernando warned. “Many mothers have been telling us their children are beginning to fall sick. There’s also been a diarrhoea outbreak due to lack of sanitation and hygiene options,” she said.

UNICEF PNG representative Angela Kearney said: “There are just so many needs there. Everything is gone.” Avoiding malnutrition was a priority with about 50 percent of PNG children “stunted... not the right height for their weight. A week with no food can tip them into acute-severe malnutrition.”

The social disaster is compounded by the deterioration of public services, in particular the health system. Malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS are rife. Many children in remote areas are poorly vaccinated. As well as the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been outbreaks of whooping cough and measles.

PNG, an Australian colony until 1975, is one of the world’s poorest countries. It ranks 154th out of 193 countries on the UN Human Development Index. Its considerable valuable resources, including oil, gas, gold, silver and timber are exploited by transnational companies that make vast profits from their operations.

The landslide site is near the giant Porgera gold and silver mine co-owned by Canadian-based Barrick Gold and China’s Zijin Mining. Initially mainly concerned about accessibility of the road to the site, the mine’s management has now donated \$US1 million to the relief effort, including supplies of food, medical items

and tarpaulins. The company has a long history of environmental damage and degradation in a region where 50,000 villagers rely mainly on subsistence farming.

The corrupt PNG ruling elite, which garners its share of the profits from the resources industry, displays disdain for the majority of the country’s 10.5 million people. With parliament reportedly “distracted” by an impending vote of no confidence in the government, Prime Minister James Marape took until May 31 to visit the site.

Marape dismissively told parliament that “nature threw a disastrous landslip.” According to the prime minister, natural disasters have cost the country more than 500 million kina (\$A196 million) this year, before the landslide at Enga, blaming “extraordinary rainfall.”

Culpability lies with the PNG government, which prioritises business interests above the health and welfare of the population. This was highlighted during the COVID pandemic when, ending a national lockdown in July 2020, Marape bluntly declared: “COVID-19 not only affects us health-wise, but also economically. We must adjust to living with the COVID-19... we will not shut down our country again.”

Australia and New Zealand made paltry offers of assistance to what is an unfolding humanitarian disaster. In addition to disaster response teams and supplies, Canberra pledged \$A2.5 million while NZ Foreign Minister Winston Peters gave \$NZ1.5 million. Australia’s Foreign Minister Penny Wong absurdly declared; “Australia stands with the people of Papua New Guinea.”

While routinely evincing sympathy for the plight of the so-called “Pacific family” on the frequent occasions the vulnerable island states fall victim to destructive natural disasters, the imperialist powers are above all concerned about defending their geo-strategic and economic interests in the region.



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