

From pandemonium to peace: building hope in PNG's Highland classrooms



Patrick Hartwig of ICRC with Wabi primary school head teacher Kepson Pokia

Photo Credit: Emily Contador-Kelsall

by Emily Contador-Kelsall

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Ripples of past fighting reverberate through Wabi primary school in Papua New Guinea's Southern Highlands. Floorless classrooms, empty window frames and gravel piles gathered for rebuilding all speak of recent violence.

This school was shaken by the Wabi-Sumi tribal fight that broke out in late 2019. Now, it has become a site of peace.

“The fight really had a bad impact on the kids and the community,” says head teacher Kepson Pokia. “The school was not operating for three and a half years ... in terms of developments which should have taken place at the school, it was, well, three and a half years backward. So it really disturbed us.”

PNG's Highlands are stunning. Weaving through hills and valleys along the Highlands Highway you will see perfect landscapes, and stalls by the road with stacks of pineapples, mandarins and peanuts harvested from rich soil. This highway runs through the Southern Highlands province, traversing Kagua-Erave district. Moving off the main road and along a bumpy gravel road from Kagua Station, you will eventually arrive at Wabi school.

Here, students from surrounding communities attend classes. Before, the school welcomed approximately 500 students, taught by 17 teachers. After being closed for years due to the fighting and its impacts, students started coming back to classes last year, with a full return expected for the upcoming school term.

Tribal fights in the Highlands can have devastating humanitarian consequences. They can be violent and destructive – houses burned and looted, food gardens destroyed, public infrastructure damaged, and deaths, injuries and assaults. Fights can break out for many reasons, such as generational disputes, election results, or

smaller altercations and misunderstandings.

While tribal fighting is not new to the Highlands, over the past decades the nature of fights has changed and they have become increasingly unpredictable and intense. In the past, a decision to fight with an opposing tribe was made collectively. Now, however, that isn't always the case. A combination of access to modern weapons, and a high youth population pushed towards violence in the face of limited employment and few opportunities in the Highlands, has worn down traditional structures.

Modern weapons have also compounded the consequences of tribal fights, as they cause more casualties. And high casualties demand hefty compensations that communities often cannot afford, resulting in prolonged displacement of people and longer periods before peace is restored.

Fighting across the Highlands disrupts students' access to education. Sometimes schools are destroyed in fights; sometimes it's too dangerous to make the journey to school and students can't attend. Here in Wabi, during the violence, the school was looted, classrooms were destroyed, and the school ceased to function.

Glenda Aldor is one of the grade 8 students at Wabi school (grades 3-8 are primary school). When the fight broke out she had to leave everything and run away with her parents. "My books, pens, and everything was burnt down and destroyed," she says. But "this year I managed to come back and complete my studies and finally sat for my examination".

Ensuring the continuity of education and a safe learning environment despite violence is a humanitarian priority. Education provides children and young people with a sense of normalcy.

The International Committee of the Red Cross ([ICRC](#)) works in the Highlands to address the humanitarian concerns and consequences arising from tribal fights. This includes providing tools to rebuild homes and restore crops, speaking with fighters to promote better behaviour, first aid training run alongside the PNG Red Cross Society, and supporting access to education through rebuilding infrastructure and donating materials. The ICRC has been working with Wabi school, supporting its rehabilitation through supplying materials for rebuilding, desks, sports equipment and stationery for students.

Councillor Waria Buka from Pira 2 Council Ward – one of the communities that was in the fight surrounding Wabi school – described how the school grounds turned into a battlefield during the fight. "Many people suffered casualties at the school grounds," he said, gesturing towards the school lawn. "This is the enemy's territory;

I would not be standing here if the fight was still active.”

These school grounds have now become a place of peace, a site where children and teenagers from surrounding communities – including tribes which have in the past been opposing – all attend the same classes.

These classes, which were interrupted for years, were interrupted again for a couple of weeks in late 2022. This time, though, it was because peace talks were being held at the school. Among piles of materials the community had brought to the site, water tanks installed by the ICRC, and classrooms waiting for repair, two leaders from each of the two fighting tribes and two from neutral council wards were discussing a path forward.

In the Highlands, battles are often short and intense, yet reaching a ceasefire or peace agreement can take months or even years – for long stretches of time, fights can remain “frozen”. In this case, there may not be active fighting, but a peace agreement is yet to be reached. Without a peace agreement in place, a fight can resume at any moment.

Often, church leaders, government officers or police are involved in facilitating peace following fights. Traditionally, peace talks and compensation – often paid in money or agricultural produce – are essential in resolving a fight. In the Wabi-Sumi fight, a neutral neighbouring tribe pushed for peace.

Grade 6 teacher Robert Tawe said people have realised the negative impact of fighting on their children’s education. “They have agreed that before any lasting peace agreement is reached, children should be allowed to go to school and school properties should not be destroyed under any circumstance.”

Peace is being built into Wabi primary school, and as the community rebuilds together they are steadfast in asserting that they do not want a fight to break out or for the school to be destroyed again. As Mr Pokia says: “The school will exist when there is peace in the communities, when people are in peace, the school will be there.”

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