

Enga tribal violence: PNG's top security threat comes from within

by Michael Kabuni

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The Akali Tange Association is one of the groups objecting to the granting of the Porgera Mine social license.

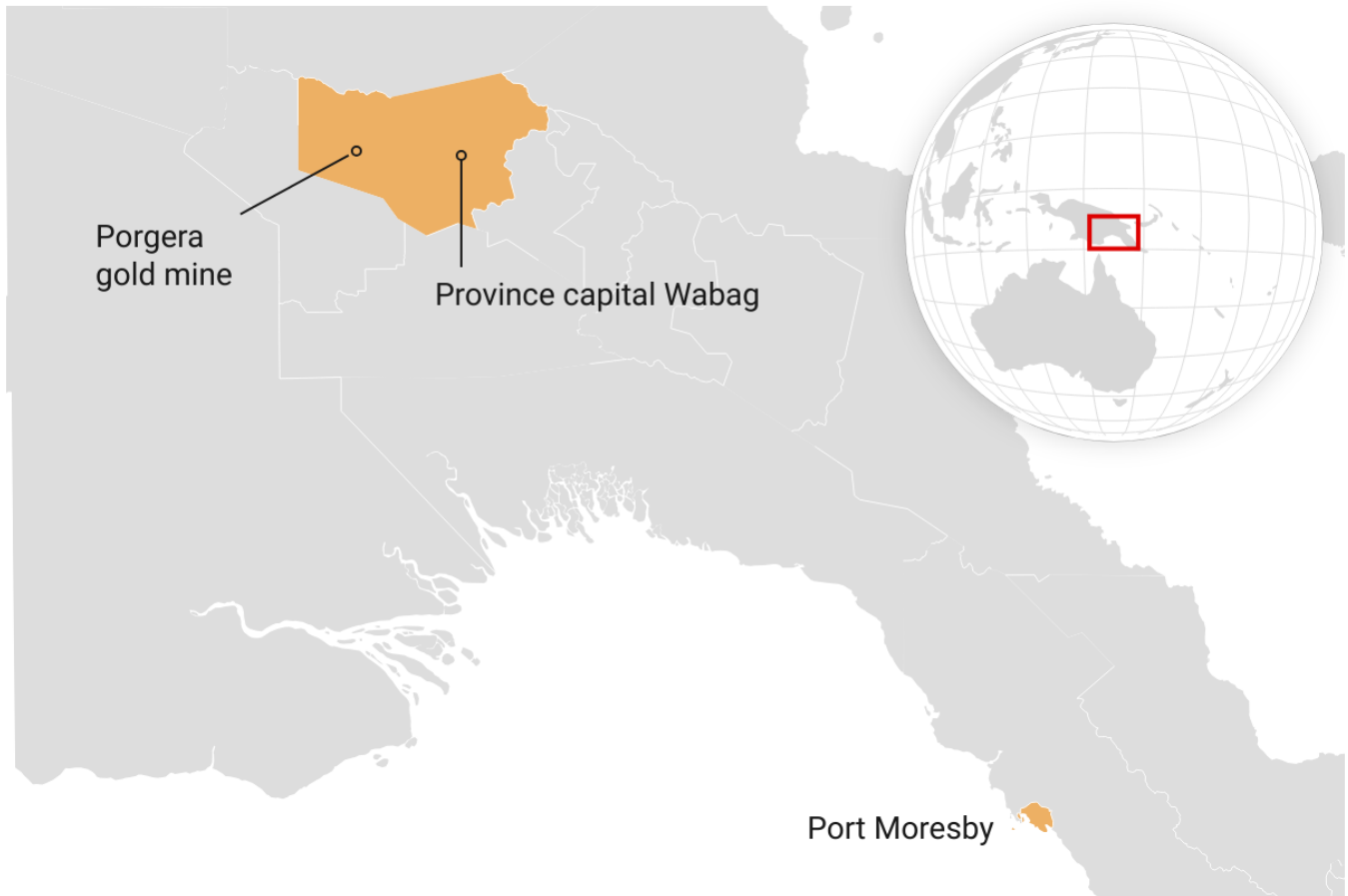
Photo Credit: [Facebook/akalitange](#)

Recent tribal clashes in Porgera, Enga province, have claimed the lives of **up to 30 people**, with 17 tribes involved. Earlier in February, **49 people died** in tribal warfare in Enga, following 60 deaths the previous year. These recurring conflicts, marked by brutal violence and cycles of retribution, reflect deeper, systemic issues. The February conflict was temporarily **halted by a ceasefire**, known as the Hilton Peace Accord, signed in Port Moresby.

Violence in PNG is not limited to Enga. In July, 26 people, including 16 women and children, were killed in East Sepik province, while 22 people died in Port Moresby in January 2024 during riots. These incidents occur against the backdrop of several international security agreements signed in 2023, such as the PNG-US Defence Cooperation Agreement and the PNG-Australia Framework for Closer Security Relations. However, the ongoing internal violence highlights that PNG's primary security threats are domestic.

Police attribute the latest Enga tribal violence to illegal miners and settlers, who they claim have been terrorizing traditional landowners. However, tribal fights in this region stem from a range of causes, including land disputes, past conflicts, and misunderstandings. Tom Lino, the MP for Wabag Open in Enga, suggests the **hasty reopening** of the Porgera Mine, without adequate negotiations with landowners or proper resettlement efforts, has exacerbated tensions.

Figure 1: Enga Province, Papua New Guinea



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Disputes over royalties and the growing population since the mine's establishment in the 1990s have fueled **in-fighting among landowners**. Once conflict begins, the use of semi-automatic weapons and **mercenaries** often leads to severe and uncontrollable violence.

The PNG government has responded to these conflicts, as it has in the past, by declaring a 'state of emergency' and authorizing security forces to use lethal force. However, this is a temporary solution and does little to prevent future clashes. Long-term solutions require investment in law and order, as well as addressing the "**legacy issues**" since the start of the mine's operation in the 1990s. These issues include limiting benefits to those within the special mining lease (SML) area, resettling displaced landowners, managing illegal miners, improving health and education services, and addressing human rights violations.

Porgera mine has a troubled history, with allegations of **human rights abuses** by the mine security and police, including more than 100 women who reported **sexual violence** in December 2023. These concerns, along with rising illegal mining and squatting, may not have been properly addressed before the mine's reopening.

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Any of these unresolved issues can trigger conflict, and when violence erupts, local warlords – armed with **semi-automatic weapons** – often overpower security forces. An estimated 50,000 illegal firearms are in circulation in PNG, while **the police-to-citizen ratio** stands at 1:1,845, far below the UN's recommended 1:450. Under-resourced and overstretched, police struggle to maintain control in hostile areas like Enga, where tribes are often better armed.

The lack of investment in law and order by successive PNG governments has left the police force ill-equipped to manage escalating violence. The rush to extract profits from resource-rich areas without addressing legacy issues and managing local expectations continues to create fault lines for conflict. Critics argue that the government has **ceded responsibility** for landowner identification to resource companies, whose priority is often expediency over thorough community engagement. Without addressing these underlying issues, conflicts in resource-rich areas and Papua New Guinea in general are unlikely to subside.

This blog was first published by BenarNews.

*Read Devpolicy Blog's in-depth coverage of the **Porgera gold mine and associated development issues**.*

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