

Stop the see-saw: how to address conflict in the PNG Highlands

by Sinclair Dinnen and Miranda Forsyth

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Enga Province

Photo Credit: Sinclair Dinnen

A question commonly asked about the inter-group conflict currently occurring in the PNG Highlands is whether or not it represents the continuation of longstanding patterns of violence or is something quite different. The answer, of course, is that it is both. While there are continuities — for instance, violence as a culturally accepted form of conflict resolution — there are also stark differences.

It's instructive to compare today's situation with a "snapshot" of inter-group violence in 1984. In that year [the Clifford Report](#) was published, arguably the most comprehensive review of law and order in PNG's post-independence period. The report noted that fighting was "sporadic and geographically limited", and that fight-related deaths and injuries were "insignificant" compared to other causes of mortality and morbidity. Fighting was not seen to have impeded economic development, with a business survey indicating that it imposed less costs than other types of crime. Participants were able to minimise the personal impact of fighting by removing portable valuables and their families to a safe place, and by limiting weapons to spears and arrows. Most tellingly, the report observed, "[i]t is remarkable that guns are never used."

A lot has changed in the intervening four decades.

There has been a profound erosion in traditional governance systems. This has taken place at the same time as the introduction and spread of increasingly sophisticated firearms since the late 1980s. The combination of the two has completely altered the conduct and outcomes of contemporary fighting.

[Anthropologist John Burton](#) claims that "[t]hese weapons have swept the bowmen off the battlefields as surely as the Panzers brushed aside the valiant Polish cavalymen on the North European Plain in September 1939". Today's fighters are armed with M16s, AR15s, self-loading rifles and pump action shotguns. PNG's extensive and porous borders enable the smuggling of such weapons into the country, while many believe that political and other leaders are involved in their

supply to local fighters. The advent of mercenaries and guerrilla tactics has further transformed the ground rules of inter-group conflict, with **traditional restraints breaking down** and ever-increasing casualties making it difficult to achieve the equivalence integral to older forms of peacemaking.

The human and other costs of contemporary fighting are **enormous and growing**, including loss of lives, injuries, rape and sexual assault, intergenerational trauma, destruction of gardens, livestock, schools and other public facilities, the withdrawal of government services from affected areas and displacement of local populations. Women are no longer safely removed from the battle zone; rather rape is increasingly being used as a technique of war. Boys are enrolled into battle at a young age, **some as young as ten**. While still viewed predominantly as a Highlands problem, inter-group conflict has also become a major source of insecurity in other areas, **including the National Capital District (NCD)**. For example, data from an armed violence assessment by the Small Arms Survey found that inter-group fighting was the **second most likely form of victimisation** in the National Capital District with its large multi-ethnic population.

A pressing question is: how to respond?

A quick historical review shows a pattern of short, militaristic and often brutal state responses, punctuating long periods of state absence. Such interventions rely on emergency measures and special operations, involving paramilitary police mobile squads and defence force personnel working together in designated fight zones. This is **extremely dangerous work**, with security personnel often outnumbered and outgunned by fighters with extensive local networks and familiar with local terrain. Such interventions are also expensive, requiring transport and sustenance for security forces sourced from other areas. Typically, they are also short-term — a “fire brigade” response intended to extinguish the fire before withdrawal. Following the terrible events in Enga earlier this month, there have been many calls for such a militarised type of response.

Yet there have also been other voices, noting the importance of local leaders and community-led NGOs that shoulder responsibility for dispute resolution and peacemaking in the space left by the largely absent state. Their leadership, cultural knowledge, communications skills and relationships are clearly critical.

Which of these offers the better approach?

Again, the answer is both. There is no doubt that given the evolving technologies of Highlands warfare, there is a need for prompt and firm state security responses to stop fighting and save lives. However, there needs to be a fundamental break with

the traumatising ways in which this has historically occurred, and it needs to occur in partnership with local peacebuilders and leaders.

What does this mean?

First, the state response should not come over the top of community responses and then suddenly withdraw, leaving behind traumatised and resentful local populations. Instead, state security agencies need to work together with the network of community leaders, church groups and NGOs often doing extraordinary, though largely invisible, work at local levels. These include the local experts who understand the context and background to particular conflicts and can skilfully navigate through their complexities. Bringing the state back in should not be a temporary, episodic event confined to local crises. State actors need to build longstanding relationships, and to be present even when the media attention goes away.

Second, there needs to be a commitment to bringing courts and other justice services into areas where they often have a limited presence. People need to see that those who perpetrate crimes of violence face consequences for them – if not, it is hard to blame people for seeking to defend themselves by acquiring guns. Justice also needs to be administered to the entrepreneurs and beneficiaries of conflict, and not just to the fighters themselves. A reliable justice system would also enable small disputes to be resolved before they escalate into warfare.

Third, there is a very great need for responding to the problem of trauma caused by long exposure to violence. Government and donor funding is needed to help the population heal, and to stop the cycles of violence being perpetuated by the next generation.

Finally, the underlying problem of guns needs to be acknowledged as a national security priority. Addressing it effectively will require good state-local partnerships.

Building peace in conflict-affected parts of the Highlands will not happen quickly, but it will never happen if there is a recurring see-saw between state and community-led responses. The best prospect for both the stabilisation of ongoing conflict, and the gradual spread of peace, is investment in long-term partnerships between state and community actors.

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