

The true value of law and order in Papua New Guinea

by Michael Main and James Komengi

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Armed clan near Komo, Hela Province, Papua New Guinea

Photo Credit: Michael Main

Please note that this article contains a description of violence that could be distressing for some readers.

Rosa Yakapus was tortured and murdered by a group of men who believed she killed her estranged husband by removing his heart and eating it without leaving a mark on his body. The location was a remote and deeply impoverished corner of Papua New Guinea's Hela Province. Rosa's three-day ordeal in early July 2025 progressed from interrogation while stripped naked, to torture by being tied between two poles spreadeagled over a fire built beneath her genitals, to assassination by a gunshot to the head that sent her huddled body rolling into a river. It was all captured on video using mobile phones and then posted to Facebook and sent around via WhatsApp.

These videos were brought to the attention of journalists and the story featured in *The Australian* and made headlines in one of PNG's major daily newspapers, the *Post Courier*. Such was the public outrage and shame at the tarnishing of PNG's public image that politicians and PNG's police commissioner committed to arresting and charging all those involved in this brutal act of sexualised violence. Police had been made aware of Rosa's torture while she was still alive and had made attempts to rescue her but were unable to complete their mission because they couldn't obtain enough diesel for the Landcruiser vehicle needed to make the journey through the rough, mountainous terrain.

If the problem was simply a question of money then increased funding should soon be available. In 2023, Australia committed \$200 million — Official Development Assistance (ODA) and non-ODA — over four years as part of its **Bilateral Security Agreement** to support PNG's internal security priorities. These priorities include building PNG's law and justice capabilities with combined investments in law, justice and policing that will increase from \$60 million per year (ODA) currently to \$110 million per year (ODA and non-ODA) by 2026-27. On 19 June 2024, Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Penny Wong, **announced a set of initiatives** to

strengthen Papua New Guinea's internal security and law and justice priorities as part of the \$200 million agreement. The media release gave details directly relevant to the current case:

“We will deliver additional support for stability in the PNG Highlands, including a new program to help PNG improve weapons management and a partnership with the International Committee of the Red Cross. We will also provide further assistance to PNG in ‘non-traditional’ security areas, such as cyber, biosecurity, and to address gender-based violence.”

Following the exposure given to the assault by PNG and international media, properly funded and logistically coherent efforts were made to apprehend, arrest and detain a total of eight men from the area where Rosa Yakapus was tortured and killed. These men should have been clearly identifiable from the video that was circulated of them torturing and killing Rosa, which had been filmed by people who were themselves participating in the event. On 7 July, [Prime Minister James Marape](#) “applauded the swift arrest” of the eight suspects who were taken to police cells to await trial.

On Friday 25 July, all eight suspects were released following an order from the Tari National Court. The court ordered their release because no charges had been laid since their detention. According to police sources in Tari, there had not been any investigation to identify the perpetrators and instead the police had rounded up seemingly random members of the community to give the appearance of taking action in response to political pressure.

On 31 July, the *Post Courier* reported that Police Commissioner David Manning had issued [instructions for the rearrest](#) of the eight suspects, adding that they were being protected by their community who were now hiding them from police. But if the court ordered their release because they had been arrested at random without investigation, then their rearrest does not make any sense. Are these eight men the actual culprits? At this point, it is worth underlining that if police had had sufficient fuel to reach the area at the time of the assault, Rosa Yakapus might still be alive.

This incident is by no means unique. Suspects are so regularly released that communities are too afraid to report even the most violent crimes to police for fear of reprisals. Australia is making funding commitments to a system that's in a state of collapse. Between Australia's aid program and the PNG government, it is difficult to know which regime of governance is more disconnected from this reality.

And we have seen this before. The collapse in law and order in the PNG highlands was brought to international attention in February 2023 when [an Australian](#)

archaeologist and his team were kidnapped and held for ransom. Again, it was media attention and the subsequent shaming of the PNG government that resulted in concerted action being taken. Again, this action has not produced any meaningful results as the kidnapers continue to terrorise local communities in the same area.

In a recent article, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute points out that “the PNG Defence Force [PNGDF] is largely accepted as having a law-and-order role to assist in maintaining internal security alongside the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary”. This is certainly the case in relation to the initial police effort to rescue Rosa Yakapus — it included PNGDF assistance because the group that was holding Rosa was heavily armed — yet the mission was so poorly resourced it couldn’t afford fuel.

Not all police and soldiers in Hela Province are poorly equipped or face the risk of running out of fuel. ExxonMobil funds three platoons of soldiers to protect its PNG LNG Project. We were able to speak to some of these soldiers when they came to Tari to do their banking. When questioned as to their role in the province they deliver a standard response, “we are here to protect state assets”. These state assets amount to the biggest resource extraction investment in the history of the Asia-Pacific region. The PNG LNG Project is estimated to be generating between US\$3 billion and US\$4 billion in revenue per year. Hela should be the wealthiest province in the nation.

It is a little over 100 kilometres by road from the PNG LNG state assets at Hides to the location where Rosa was tortured. Australia is two years into its \$200 million bilateral security agreement. It should be clear by now that PNG’s internal security problems, notably including the failure to prevent the public torture and execution of Rosa Yakapus, are not being caused by a lack of money. Perhaps we could begin with the understanding that the most valuable assets of the state are its people.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/the-true-value-of-law-and-order-in-papua-new-guinea-20250815/>