

# Shots fired in clash between Papua New Guinea police and military

By John Braddock  
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Police in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are investigating a violent clash between the country's police and army in the early hours of New Year's Day in the capital Port Moresby, during which gun shots were fired.

Senior police officers, including National Capital District police chief Ben Turi, were reportedly assaulted by soldiers outside the Boroko police station. At least one officer was injured. Local television station EMTV captured the conflict on camera, showing a group of PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) personnel firing shots into the air.

The fracas appeared to be connected with an earlier incident involving an army captain, who threatened to shoot police officers manning a roadblock. A PNGDF spokesman claimed that, according to a preliminary investigation, a police patrol stopped a military vehicle and assaulted the officers, who were with their families. Police searched the vehicle and confiscated a civilian pistol.

PNGDF Commander Brigadier-General Gilbert Toropo told NBC News that the soldiers responsible for the assault would be handed over to the police, and would also be dealt with under the code of military discipline.

Prime Minister Peter O'Neill promptly downplayed the incident as "undisciplined behaviour" by a "handful of individuals." He issued a directive to police and military chiefs to enforce a "one-strike and you are out" policy for "unacceptable behaviour."

O'Neill claimed: "The public expects better from our service personnel and there are many young committed men and women who want to join the forces."

Longstanding tensions exist between the two armed forces. In November 2015, a clash between the military and police in Port Moresby left one person dead and four others injured. In December 2014, the police and

army formed a joint taskforce to investigate a shootout between the two forces that left four men in hospital with gunshot wounds. Businesses located near the confrontation closed their doors and there were reports of looting.

Ongoing conflicts between police and soldiers highlight the explosive social antagonisms in PNG, which are being fuelled by a deepening economic crisis.

Jerry Singirok, a former PNG Defence Force commander, told Radio Australia that the latest incident showed a "total breakdown in discipline" in both the police and army. He blamed a "lack of leadership" by the military, civil service and political leaders, declaring the whole country was "falling apart." The former military head warned that a "breakdown in law and order" could see PNG become "a police state or a failed state."

The PNG police and military have been repeatedly mobilised over the past year to suppress mounting political opposition to the government and social unrest. Severe government austerity measures, fuelled by the collapse in global prices of commodities, including oil and gas, have seen deepening attacks on the living standards of the working class and rural poor.

In May, students at the country's main universities initiated two months of class boycotts and protests over demands that O'Neill resign over corruption allegations. The protests climaxed on June 8 when heavily-armed police fired on unarmed student demonstrators at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG), wounding at least 23 people.

The government insisted on harsh punishment for the students, establishing a witch-hunting inquiry to determine whether "outside influence" was responsible for "unrest" at the universities. Its purpose was to

exonerate the police and absolve the government of any responsibility. When the UPNG reopened after a two-month closure, eight student leaders were summarily barred from re-enrolling.

More repressive measures were signalled at a National Security Advisory Council meeting in July where Chief Secretary Isaac Lupari threatened to invoke dictatorial security laws. A National Security Joint Task Force, including police and military personnel, was established to “quell increasing internal security threats.”

In August, traditional landowners in Hela province, in the mountainous interior, blockaded the huge ExxonMobil liquefied natural gas (LNG) project, in protest over long-overdue royalty payments, disrupting the flow of gas. The government deployed 60 police as the dispute threatened to erupt into another crisis.

This past weekend, 300 armed police and troops were sent to Hela where authorities claim dozens of people have died in “tribal conflict.” The foreshadowed six-month security operation is to protect the Exxon-Mobil plant, in which Washington has a major strategic interest. None of the promised benefits from the LNG project to improve living standards has been realised and landowners are threatening to physically attack the plant over continued lack of payments

Hostility to the whole political establishment is mounting. In October, five Electoral Commission officials were attacked while on their way to replace an election manager in the Southern Highlands. In November, two men were shot dead when armed men stopped a provincial governor’s convoy, which included two MPs. Police responded by burning houses and gardens in a purported attempt to flush out those responsible.

The police force is notorious for lawlessness and brutality. Police are currently facing a series of investigations over abuses committed against people in custody. These include the alleged rape and torture of a female prisoner in the Waigani police cells, the shooting death of two inmates at the Boram jail by Correctional Service officers during a mass break-out at the facility, and an alleged assault on two Iranian asylum seekers on Manus Island who accused police of beating and jailing them on New Year’s Eve.

Elections will be held this year and large numbers of police and soldiers will be deployed across the country

to suppress discontent and opposition among workers and youth. Cuts of up to 40 percent in education and health last year have fuelled repeated strikes by public sector workers.

Opposition leader Don Polye used his New Year message to admonish ordinary people to “change their attitudes” and be “more responsible in the use of their finances.” He said in 2017 the country would face a serious financial crisis, and life would “be hard for many small people like public servants,” who were likely to have to forgo salary payments.

According to Australian economist Paul Flanagan, PNG is two years into a recession that has already cut living standards by 5 percent. He says the government is effectively printing money to fund its budget deficit. In an “extraordinary step,” Flanagan notes, for the first time in the country’s 41-year history since formal independence, the government has refused to release the International Monetary Fund’s 2016 summary of the PNG economy, indicating it is in a dire state.

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