



30 DEC, 2023

Neglected member of our 'Pacific family'

Canberra Times, Canberra

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REFUGEES A desperate situation is unfolding in our nearest neighbouring countries Neglected member of our 'Pacific family'

MARK
GAETANI



THE nation of Papua New Guinea, independent from Australia since 1975, has many friends here, people who work in the country, including the Australian Federal Police, business owners, holiday travellers, those making pilgrimages to World War II sites such as the Kokoda Track, Rabaul and Milne Bay.

A sign of special affection is the likelihood that PNG may field a team (hopefully a women's one too) in the Australian NRL competition, rugby league being considered the country's national sport.

As our politicians have become fond of telling us, PNG belongs to the "Pacific family". We share democracy, respect for religion, family loyalty, a capacity for hard work.

PNG's cultures are unique and its physical beauty is unsurpassed, from the magnificent Highlands to its marine life.

However, the country is caught between two great states, the Republic of Indonesia, which controls half of New Guinea island, and nearby Australia.

In theory, this should not create concerns but the fallout from PNG's location is a massive problem that can be summarised in a single word - refugees.

Asylum seekers in PNG have come from diverse backgrounds and undertaken very different journeys to get there. Their time in PNG ranges from years to decades and their living conditions span the poor to the abominable.

The larger cohort has fled from Indonesian-run West Papua, formerly Irian Jaya, since the late 1960s, accelerating in the 1980s when the military began a harsh crackdown on people objecting to Jakarta's rule.

The locals' concerns centred on racism in a country that preached "unity in diversity" and the pressure of "transmigrants" from

other parts of Indonesia who were settled on land compulsorily acquired by the government.

Relations deteriorated further when an armed guerilla force, the Free Papua Movement, or OPM, ramped up a resistance that continues to this day, largely out of sight due to a ban on journalists.

More than 15,000 West Papuans have crossed the border into PNG and up to two decades later they remain in a series of dire refugee settlements. One site, Iowara in remote Western Province, houses - to use the term loosely - from 2500-3000 West Papuan asylum seekers and refugees.

Their ongoing, desperate circumstances were explained recently by PNG visitor Jason Siwat, director of the refugee program for the Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG and Solomon Islands.

He told St Vincent de Paul Society that, "The West Papuans have conflict with local landowners, so cannot farm, they face food insecurity, are unable to pay school fees, they even suffer untreated snake bites when they move about to gather firewood or hunt for food."

In the capital of Port Moresby, Mr Siwat has just undertaken a survey of West Papuans living in makeshift camps, concluding that they "live in one of the most unhygienic and destitute conditions that you can find anywhere in Oceania and the Pacific that host refugees".

This included 21 families sharing one toilet and one tap. Some slept on cardboard. There was flooding, health problems were rife, unemployment was gauged to be 80 per cent. Many children do not attend school.

Elsewhere in Port Moresby exists a smaller refugee cohort, numbering 59, comprising people who fled from trouble spots such as Iran, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.



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Their plight, notably evictions from rented premises, has been the subject of media coverage and was highlighted in an urgent appeal from the PNG Catholic Bishops to Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil that Mr Siwat brought to Canberra.

These asylum seekers were transferred from Nauru or Manus Island detention facilities in an arrangement that neither the Morrison government, which planned it, nor the Albanese government, which continues to support it, has disclosed.

"These men are already in a desperate situation in Port Moresby," the letter reads.

"Please bring all those who are critically ill and those who cannot be resettled in another country back to Australia ... they remain your responsibility until the last man leaves our country."

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia joins with the PNG Catholic Bishops in urging a proper resolution to the terrible plight of all refugees currently in Papua New Guinea, whatever their place of origin or the reasons for their fleeing. These folk are part of our human family, deserving of proper care and being resettled in safe places where they can pursue a decent life for themselves and their children.

■ Mark Gaetani is the national president of St Vincent de Paul Society.

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More than 15,000 West Papuans have crossed the border into Papua New Guinea. Picture Shutterstock