

Sorcery Accusation–Related Violence in Papua New Guinea Part 3: State and Non-State Responses

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This is the third In Brief of a four-part series on the findings from a quantitative analysis of media and case law relating to sorcery accusation–related violence (SARV) in Papua New Guinea during a 20-year period (1996–2016). As [In Brief 2017/29](#) highlighted, often large groups of people were involved as perpetrators and witnesses. This In Brief concentrates on reported responses by the community and the state to specific incidents of SARV. Overall the analysis suggests both relative impunity for those who engage in SARV and a high degree of community complicity in the violence, indicated by the fact that in 59 per cent of cases no actions at all were reported as being taken by anyone to help or support the victim(s) in any way. More positively, since 2002 there is a clear ascending trend in the rates of attempted rescue and support of victims by police, villagers and churches reported in the media.

Criminal Justice Responses

In our database of 452 incidents, in 160 incidents (35 per cent) there was no reported response at all from the state justice system, and in 13 incidents (3 per cent) it was reported that the police were aware of the incident but did nothing. In 15 incidents (3 per cent), including two with the police, other authorities (church pastors, community leaders) were reported as condoning or participating in the violence. The police were reported to have intervened to stop the violence in only 57 incidents (13 per cent). Where they did intervene, however, they were often completely successful (60 per cent) or partially successful (16 per cent) and overall may have prevented the killing of 120 victims. The police were reported as being completely unsuccessful in reducing the severity or incidents of harm in 14 cases. In these they either came too late or were outnumbered by perpetrators and in one case rescued the victims and then delivered them back to the perpetrators.

In more than half of the reported incidents (53 per cent), the police were described as investigating the incidents. Arrests of suspects were mentioned in 30 per cent of reported incidents

($n = 137$) during the 20-year period. From 2000, the number of reported incidents rose, to a peak in 2011 of 46 incidents, before declining in the next five years to an average of about 27 a year. The annual number of reported incidents where at least one suspect was arrested broadly follow these trends; 2012 had a peak of 13 incidents in which at least one arrest was made. In 2014 there was spike in the number of reported arrests with an incident in Madang resulting in the arrest of more than 100 suspects. Even with this number excluded, it was estimated that at least 500 suspects were arrested in relation to the 137 incidents during the 20-year period, which shows how often a large group is involved in SARV.

In one quarter of the incidents it was reported that at least one suspect was charged. The proportion of the annual number of incidents reported as resulting in charges climbed to 47 per cent in 2002 before declining to 24 per cent in 2005 and then fluctuated each year to stay on average at this level over the next 11 years. Based on the reports, at least 14 categories of charges were laid, with the most common being murder ($n = 239$, which includes the 100 charged in Madang, 53 per cent) and wilful murder ($n = 141$, 31 per cent). Relatively few were reported as being charged with other types of offences and the most prevalent of those were arson ($n = 15$) and grievous bodily harm ($n = 11$). Charges related to deprivation of liberty, killing of animals, aiding criminals and aggravated rape and torture were each reported in less than five incidents. The lack of use of less serious charges is puzzling. Another notable absence is lack of charges for those responsible for inciting or conspiring in or aiding and abetting the violence. Often it is those who carried out the violence who are charged, rather than those who orchestrated and profited from the violence and who may be more morally culpable.

Only 70 incidents (15 per cent) resulted in a trial of at least one suspect. A total of 254 alleged offenders went to trial during the 20 years covered, including the 100 in Madang. These are conservative and incomplete estimates of court processes and outcomes because we have not had access to

all the court judgments during this period, only those reported on the [Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute database](#) or in the newspapers.

For 63 of the incidents that went to court a conviction was recorded. For three incidents the cases were dismissed for lack of evidence, and in four others there was no reporting on whether there was a conviction. Between 1996 and 2016, a total of 127 suspects were reported as convicted and if the Madang case is excluded (as the judgment was due at the end of October 2017), 82 per cent of suspects who went to trial were reported as convicted. The average age of the sentenced individuals was 28 and there were 11 juveniles (15–18 years old). One noticeable feature of these cases is that although often many perpetrators appear to have been involved, only one or two were actually pursued through the criminal justice system. In this respect the case in Madang in 2014 is a definite watershed.

Sentences were reported for 59 incidents (13 per cent of all incidents overall), and these were imposed on 115 individuals, a very small proportion of the 15,000 perpetrators we conservatively estimated were involved (see [In Brief 2017/29](#)). In one case in 2005 two men were sentenced to death and in two other cases sentences of life imprisonment were imposed. The majority — 40 incidents — resulted in terms of imprisonment for at least one of the perpetrators. The sentence varied with the seriousness of the offence; the mean was 18.6 years for wilful murder and 16.3 years for murder, with a trend towards higher sentences in more recent years. The sentence involved hard labour in 33 cases (29 per cent). For 24 individuals (21 per cent) their prison sentence was entirely or partially suspended.

One important finding of the research is the gender disparity in the cases that reached court: the vast majority of cases that progressed through the criminal justice system concerned male victims. Of the 70 trials, 50 were cases where men were the sole victims and only 14 where women were the sole victims (six trials involved men and women). This indicates a real disparity in the criminal justice system that urgently needs attention (see also Auka et al. 2014). However, it is also relevant that prison sentences were longer when victims were females (mean = 22.4 years) than when victims were males (mean = 17.6 years).

Rescue and Victim Support

There were attempted rescues reported in 72 cases (16 per cent) undertaken by a range of people including police, villagers and family. The rates of rescue and attempted rescue have increased since 2002. In 72 incidents (16 per cent) victims also received support from hospitals, police, churches or non-government organisations, and the rates of support have been increasing unevenly since 2000.

Reconciliation and Compensation

There were surprisingly few instances (37 cases, 8 per cent of overall incidents) of reported non-state reconciliation or compensatory measures taken, although this may be because they occurred some time after the incident and were not reported. Those that were recorded include compensation payments (n = 16), peace negotiations/reconciliation (14) and mediation (9). There is no apparent trend across time in such measures. The Autonomous Region of Bougainville had the highest number of cases where such measures had been taken.

Author Notes

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Reference

Auka, R., B. Gore and P.R. Koralyo 2014. [Sorcery- and Witchcraft-Related Killings in Papua New Guinea: The Criminal Justice System Response](#). In M. Forsyth and R. Eves (eds). *Talking It Through: Responses to Sorcery and Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia*. Canberra: ANU Press.

