



# Intergroup War Prevention Strategy – Can It Work in Papua New Guinea?

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The [Counter-Terrorism Act 2024](#) (CTA) was unanimously passed in Papua New Guinea's (PNG's) parliament on 28 November 2024. It repealed the [Internal Security Act 1993](#) (ISA), which was enacted to prevent acts of terrorism and through which government could designate 'proscribed organizations'. The ISA was never enforced, because the Supreme Court [found](#) it inconsistent with due process provisions of section 42 of the Constitution of the Independent State of Papua New Guinea.

The CTA created an entity called the Counter-Terrorism Joint Security Taskforce and expanded the surveillance powers of law enforcement. Under section 17 of the CTA, the Commissioner of Police can direct telecommunication providers to supply intelligence to prevent or respond to potential offences. Social media platforms and telecommunication devices are [now used by criminals](#) to coordinate crime. Hence, the CTA focuses on the surveillance capabilities of law enforcement through telecommunication providers.

When Prime Minister James Marape introduced the bill in October 2024, he touted it as 'a tough law that allows police to be proactive rather than reactive' (Post-Courier 24/10/2024). This In Brief critiques the CTA and proposes instead that stakeholders make a collective effort towards addressing intergroup warfare as a matter of national importance.

The [law and order crisis](#) in PNG from 2023 to 2024 informed the enactment of the CTA. Marape discussed that the law covers 'many facets of "terrorism", including modern-day crimes such as money laundering, and crimes oriented around information communication technology, as well as the traditional ones of tribal fights and their modern, gun-dominated versions taking place in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea' (Post-Courier 29/11/2024).

In February 2024, the aftermath of violent conflict in the [Wapenamanda district](#) of Enga province prompted the governor of the province, Sir Peter Ipatas, to [directly appeal](#) to Australia for policing resources.

## Are counter-terrorism laws adequate for intergroup warfare?

Designating intergroup warfare as terrorism is a one-dimensional policy prescription for a complex issue. The government has long relied on militaristic policing responses to increased lawlessness. These 'militaristic solutions' have been observed to be overly aggressive

(Dinnen 1999) and to have generated counterproductive outcomes such as [human rights abuses](#).

The CTA cannot solely be relied on to address intergroup warfare in PNG. The CTA exemplifies the moral panic associated with increased lawlessness in PNG. Designating intergroup warfare as '[domestic terrorism](#)' serves only to justify [heavy-handed](#) forms of intervention – a largely performative posture by the national government.

Moreover, the CTA is a piecemeal approach, disconnected from other critical policy and legislative agendas such as the urgent need for enforcing gun control measures. The CTA, much like the ISA, conflates intergroup warfare with other acts of lawlessness and puts it under the broad definition of terrorism. Because of its scale and the costs incurred to society in terms of loss of property and wholesale destruction, intergroup fighting should be addressed as a category of its own. It has its own distinct cultural and social characteristics, as well as specific remedial measures in conflict prevention and peacemaking.

What is needed is an intergroup war prevention strategy. Forsyth and Dinnen (15/4/2025) recently discussed the need for a 'comprehensive peacebuilding strategy' that 'integrates local knowledge, fosters community resilience and is responsive to the socio-cultural realities of the different regions in the country'. However, community resilience is most often overwhelmed by factors outside the control of communities, and situations can abruptly spiral into protracted conflicts. For instance, there is a [growing association](#) between intergroup violence and national elections in certain areas of PNG; national elections in PNG usually trigger violence, especially with the influx of guns and money into communities. The intergroup fighting in Wapenamanda in [Enga province](#) reported above was an old feud that was reignited through the [2022 elections](#), resulting in over 70 deaths.

Under the CTA, alternative forms of peacebuilding that could address some of the underlying factors are bypassed for what could be perceived as quick-fix solutions. The breakdown in 'traditional hierarchies and rules' and 'the loss of some traditional values such as respect for women and children' (Bariasi and Contador-Kelsall 9/2/2023) in communities, among other factors, should compel the adoption of inclusive conflict prevention methods, where all national, provincial and local-level stakeholders are involved.

## What should an intergroup war prevention strategy include?

Communities prone to intergroup warfare are best placed to understand conflict prevention and should be empowered to take ownership of law and order in their communities (Forsyth 2024). Other authors have also argued that 'local leaders and local insights into the temporality of the cycles of violence in the Highlands are two resources that are currently being overlooked in responses to the ongoing violence' (Forsyth et al. 14/7/2023). As Forsyth et al. point out, local knowledge and community-based approaches have proven useful mechanisms in conflict prevention or de-escalation.

An effective intergroup war prevention strategy could utilise the decentralised reporting mechanism envisaged in the Inter-group Fighting Act 1977 (IGFA). The IGFA provided for the creation of a Peace and Good Order Committee (PAGOC) made up of provincial stakeholders. A function of the PAGOC in the legislation is to report credible and real-time intelligence towards the assessment of conflict situations. PAGOCs have also evolved to acquire conflict prevention responsibilities and are informally constituted in districts and urban areas, where they carry out responsibilities related to law and order awareness.

PAGOCs, if given appropriate resources and training, could be the frontline focus of conflict prevention in communities prone to intergroup violence. In areas of law and order, intergovernmental coordination for intelligence sharing and reporting functions remains a problem. PAGOCs should perform functional roles as early warning signals to conflict situations, and where mitigation of conflict can be initiated. PAGOCs can be empowered to help maintain safety in their communities. Previously successful programs such as the Justice Services and Stability for Development Program, as implemented in the Southern Highlands province in 2018, would be useful.

Another important issue for an intergroup war prevention strategy to cover would be the issue of guns. A good start would be to revisit the Gun Control Report of 2005 with a view to implementing some of its key recommendations. The high casualty rates and the destructive nature of current intergroup conflicts can be attributed solely to the use of modern firearms in communities. While legislative bipartisanship was evident in the enactment of the CTA, achieving the same level of political support to implement recommendations from the 2005 gun control

report would be highly improbable, because of the involvement of politicians and local business leaders in the flow of guns into war zones.

## Conclusion

Intergroup warfare used to be in the form of localised violence. However, its impact now has national ramifications, especially with outflow of displaced populations into urban areas and other provinces. Intergroup conflicts also undermine the resilience of the institutions of state and reinforce the image of PNG as a failed state, unable to deliver the most basic collective public good of law and order. PNG must be able to maintain order in its domestic affairs and uphold the rule of law domestically — the most basic tasks of a sovereign state committed to upholding its national sovereignty. As PNG celebrates its 50th anniversary of independence this year, a commitment to the provision of security must be front and centre of its collective efforts.

## Author notes

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