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Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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The Misuse of Dialogue and Cooperation with Rights Abusers

Protecting Students, Teachers, and Schools from Attack

The Changing Media Landscape and NGOs

As construction of a US\$15 billion project to tap Papua New Guinea's rich liquefied natural gas (LNG) reserves got underway in 2010, Prime Minister Michael Somare predicted that his troubled country was on the verge of transformation. But longstanding problems that have consistently hobbled progress in the country were on display throughout the year. Corruption scandals grabbed the headlines, a UN investigation highlighted by now familiar patterns of brutal police abuse, and violence against women and girls continued to be widespread.

Just as troubling are signs that the government is more committed to avoiding accountability than improving its capacity to govern responsibly. In 2010 the government moved to curtail the powers of its own widely-praised Ombudsman Commission, while also trying to enact legislation that would strip citizens of their right to challenge the legality of controversial extractive industry projects in court.

The government has staked the country's future on its extraordinary abundance of natural resources. Extractive industries are the main engine of the economy, but the government has a long track record of failing to adequately regulate them. In 2010 there were already worrying signs that the LNG project could generate violent disputes among landowners over compensation payments, this a full four years before the gas is expected to flow.

In many ways the government has left large multinational extractive companies to regulate themselves. For instance private security forces at the sprawling Porgera gold mine-operated by Barrick Gold, a Canadian company-have been implicated in incidents of gang rape and other human rights abuses. Yet the government provides no meaningful oversight of such private security forces or effective, accessible channels for victims to report such abuses.

In 2010 a group of citizens filed suit to prevent the Chinese-owned Ramu nickel mine from building a pipeline that would deposit mine waste into the ocean. The government responded by introducing amendments to the country's Environment Act that would strip citizens of their right to challenge government-sanctioned projects in court. At this writing the amendments have been passed by parliament but not signed into law. Supporters of the Ramu mine also reportedly intimidated and harassed the plaintiffs in the case.

Human Rights Watch has previously documented widespread patterns of abuse by Papua New Guinea's police force, including use of excessive force, torture, and sexual violence, against children as well as adults. These abuses remain rampant and almost all of those responsible continue to enjoy impunity. In the face of widespread violent crime, such tactics have deeply eroded the public trust and cooperation crucial to effective policing.

In May the UN special rapporteur on torture visited the country and documented routine beatings of criminal suspects that often rise to

the level of torture, extortion of sex from female detainees, corruption, and other abuses. Police sometimes deliberately disable suspects of serious crimes and escapees by cutting their tendons with bush knives and axes. The UN special rapporteur found that conditions in correctional institutions were "poor" and in police lockups "appalling." Children are regularly detained with adults in police lockups.

In July mobile police squads housed and fed by Barrick Gold at the company's Porgera gold mine allegedly kidnapped and raped three teenage girls. In an unusual and positive move, the police suspended the alleged culprits from duty and opened a criminal investigation into the incident. More than five years after the police beat and sexually assaulted several dozen women and girls (and gang raped at least four in detention) in a raid on the Three-Mile Guest House in Port Moresby in March 2004, the Ombudsman Commission issued a report finding that police had unlawfully arrested and detained the victims, used excessive force, and raped and humiliated them. The Commission also found that senior officials failed to supervise or control the officers under their command.

Violence against women and girls is epidemic in Papua New Guinea, with studies indicating that more than half of all women in Papua New Guinea have suffered physical assault by a male partner. Sexual violence against women and girls is also commonplace. Support services such as shelters and emergency health care are grossly insufficient and victims face formidable barriers to obtaining redress through the justice system, including lack of information, limited legal aid, and geographic distance. Many village courts rely on customary laws that fail to protect women's rights. The system often leaves perpetrators unpunished, a problem exacerbated by some police officers' own propensity to engage in sexual violence.

The government has regularly become embroiled in corruption scandals over the years and 2010 was no exception. A judicial report that came to light in April detailed how top-level government officials and others siphoned off some \$300 million through phony compensation claims. Meanwhile the capacity of key public institutions continues to decay, especially in rural areas where the government often fails to provide basic services like health and education. The government-against widespread civil society protests-supported moves to curtail the powers of its Ombudsman Commission, the very institution tasked with unearthing patterns of government corruption and abuse.

Papua New Guinea performs poorly on most indicators of economic and social well-being. Rates of maternal and child mortality are among the highest in the region. The closure of rural aid posts and health centers, declining transportation infrastructure, the failure of allocated funds to reach local governments, and a shortage of drugs, medical equipment, and trained health professionals all limit access to quality healthcare.

The country has the highest prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the Pacific: around 34,100 people are living with the disease (0.92 percent of adults in 2010), with young women most likely to be diagnosed. Gender-based violence and discrimination, as well as poor access to healthcare, fuel the virus's spread. People living with HIV/AIDS often face violence and discrimination. Antiretroviral therapy is inaccessible to most. Despite training, police undermine prevention efforts by targeting female sex workers and men and boys suspected of homosexual conduct for beatings and rape. Police do so in part because they can threaten arrest using laws criminalizing homosexual conduct and certain forms of sex work, and because social stigma against homosexuals and sex work shields the police from public outrage.

Primary education is neither free nor compulsory. Recent estimates of net primary school enrollment rates range from around 45 to 55 percent. Barriers include long distances to schools, a shortage of upper secondary placements, high school fees, and school closures due to insecurity. Girls in particular suffer from sexual abuse by other students and teachers, lack of water and sanitation facilities, and face daily dangerous journeys to and from school.

Australia, Papua New Guinea's former colonizer, is the country's most important international partner. Australia provides some \$450 million in assistance annually, more than it provides to any other country.

The home governments of most multinational companies working in the country provide few if any enforceable human rights standards to govern overseas corporate behavior. In 2010 Canada's parliament rejected a bill that would have taken modest steps towards establishing such standards for Canadian companies, including companies with operations in Papua New Guinea. The bill encountered fierce resistance from the mining industry.

In 2011 Papua New Guinea's human rights record is due to be examined at the UN Human Rights Council.

Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people in 90 countries worldwide, spotlighting abuses and bringing perpetrators to justice

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