



## CURRENT SITUATION

As the United States reengages in the Pacific Islands, Papua New Guinea is emerging as an increasingly important U.S. partner. It is the region's largest country, with a landmass about the size of California and a population estimated to be somewhere between 10 and 17 million. In April 2022, Papua New Guinea was designated as one of the focus countries under the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS). In May 2023, the United States and Papua New Guinea signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement.

Papua New Guinean leaders frequently characterize their foreign policy as one of “friends to all, enemies to none.” Australia is the country's largest donor and traditional partner. Non-traditional partners like China, India and Indonesia — Papua New Guinea's western neighbor — are increasingly engaging as well. Like other Pacific Island countries, Papua New Guinea would prefer not to take sides in geopolitical competition between China and the United States and its partners, as Papua New Guineans worry doing so could adversely affect their country.



## CHALLENGES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Papua New Guinea's main security and stability challenges are internal — including climate change, biodiversity loss, gender-based violence, internal stability issues, and the future political status of Bougainville.

Climate change not only threatens Papua New Guinea's low-lying atolls with sea-level rise and increasing storms, but also affects the country's interior, where changing temperatures can damage crops and unpredictable, torrential rains can lead to dangerous landslides. Climate change has already led to internal displacement within Papua New Guinea, which can exacerbate social conflict. Warming oceans are expected to deplete fisheries, which are an important part of the economy and

local livelihoods. Climate change also contributes to biodiversity loss, as does illegal logging, which is destroying Papua New Guinea's rainforests at an unsustainable rate.

Papua New Guinea faces high rates of gender-based and family violence. Papua New Guinea's demographic and health survey 2016–18 found that 56 percent of women aged 15 to 49 have experienced physical violence, and 28 percent have experienced sexual violence. Women are also underrepresented in government, with very few winning seats in parliament. Election violence and intercommunal violence, especially in the highland provinces, are also major challenges. Papua New Guinea's last national elections in 2022 were marred by violence, as were elections in 2017. Meanwhile, resource extraction, while it is an important part of Papua New Guinea's economy, can be another driver of conflict, which is why some experts have described the country as having a "resource curse."

Another element crucial to Papua New Guinea's stability is the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, an archipelago that lies east of the country's mainland. A decade-long civil war between Papua New Guinea and Bougainville, and within Bougainville itself, culminated in a 2001 peace agreement that required an independence referendum. The referendum took place 2019, with 97.7 percent of Bougainvillean voters choosing independence. However, the result was nonbinding, and Papua New Guinea's National Parliament has final say on Bougainville's future political status. It has yet to make a decision.

## USIP'S INITIATIVES

USIP's programmatic work in Papua New Guinea (PNG) can be divided into three pillars:

**Research and Analysis.** USIP is supporting PNG's National Research Institute (NRI) to identify strategies that can reduce the country's high rates of violence. USIP is also supporting research on drivers of conflict and stability in Hela and Morobe — two provinces the United States is prioritizing under the SPCPS.

**Forging a Closer Relationship between the United States and Papua New Guinea.** In September 2023, USIP convened the first U.S.-Papua New Guinea Strategic Dialogue to build relationships between U.S. and Papua New Guinea (PNG) officials and experts and to develop ideas for closer ties between the two countries. USIP also regularly hosts roundtables on peacebuilding approaches in PNG through a variety of lenses, including implementation of the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. In 2024, USIP launched a partnership with PNG's National Research Institute to encourage dialogue between diverse audiences on peacebuilding topics and to build closer ties between U.S. and PNG thought leaders.

**Support to Local Anti-Violence Initiatives.** USIP conducts trainings to address the root causes of community violence in the eastern province of Morobe. Since tackling the causes of violence is as important as tackling the symptoms, USIP programs help training participants make positive change in their communities by encouraging them to reexamine how prevailing attitudes and behaviors can contribute to conflict.