

Renouncing Threats and Violence and Progressing through Common Purpose

It's the Christmas season, when the spirit of charity and goodwill to all men, women and children should prevail. Papua New Guineans go to immense effort during festive seasons, gathering for feasts, spiritual and sporting events and enjoy the company of family and loved ones. NCD has done well this year providing more opportunities for peaceful family enjoyment. Yet, sadly large portions of the community have little to celebrate and many are living in fear and trepidation from various threats.

Just before Christmas two major health facilities, in Kudjip and Tari, providing valued medical services to large populations, were forced to close or lost key medical staff from constant threats and attacks. Nomane was mourning the pointless deaths of some community members in Moresby. Levels of violence against women and children particularly in some communities remain a national shame. We also have individuals, families and whole communities, notably in Eastern Highlands, parts of Simbu and elsewhere, living in terror of so-called sorcery or victimised as so-called sorcerers. The growing gun culture, alcohol and other drug abuse and a wide lack of respect for other people's, especially women's human rights, sometimes associated with distorted concepts marriage, bride-price and ownership, plus jealousy, combined with poverty and the breakdown of traditional restraints have exacerbated the situation. Now there are open threats circulating against foreign (notably Asian owned-operated) micro-enterprises.

Everyone wishes to enjoy fulfilling lives without fear for themselves or their children. Yet many individuals, including children, and communities experience constant threat and violence. Being constantly exposed to violence becomes self-perpetuating, similarly to some young abuse victims becoming perpetrators when older, perhaps to get their own back and show power, by inflicting suffering upon the defenceless.

Around the country there are thousands of volunteers in communities, NGOs, some public bodies (e.g. magisterial service) and businesses, combining forces to address the scourges of abuse of women and children and other violence, including the plague of weapons. However, where are the leaders? To make headway requires a much greater commitment from the power brokers at all levels.

We see political leaders pursuing major resource projects, which can develop readily – sometimes more readily - without their involvement (although requiring reliable government processes); we see our leaders allocating greater sums to their own control through trust funds and distributing proceeds selectively to beneficiaries likely to be supportive during elections, but where are they to show guts and true leadership in standing up, individually and collectively to the country's key social issues? If social, governance and law and order problems are not addressed then forget economic development, which will be restricted to enclaves.

LNG (even 2-3 projects) won't directly bring development, nor sustained jobs and value-added, so leaders should stop living in dreamland and fuelling cargo cult mentalities! It will only provide net benefits if handled carefully. Many developed countries have few natural resources, concentrated instead upon developing their human resources, and other foundations for economic and social development. LNG will provide foreign exchange and revenue, localised wealth, plus extensive

temporary employment during the brief construction phase for those with suitable skills. If the revenue (from about 2017) is used wisely and some funds retained in a sanitised sovereign ‘futures’ fund (transparently managed away from tampering hands) it could restore and upgrade infrastructure and key services, including education and skills development. However, LNG will jeopardise other industries which provide broader-based employment, including agriculture, manufacturing, tourism and even some mining ventures, unless there’s prudent fiscal and monetary management, and addressing the country’s governance and social ills and priority public investment. Botswana is one of Africa’s few countries to really benefit from its mineral wealth, thanks largely to one of the continent’s lowest corruption levels and a commitment to responsible economic management. In many countries, like Nigeria or Equatorial Guinea, oil has undermined broad-based income earning and employment, whilst fuelling an immensely wealthy and corrupt elite, plus violence, civil wars and personal tragedy.

Now we’re seeing threats to foreign micro-businesses. Many small overseas-owned businesses/households are alarmed. Their fear is heightened by experience of raids and riotous behaviour in some towns earlier this year. Whilst only a small group may orchestrate trouble, it can readily erupt more widely, with opportunists fuelling the fire for their own ends, although calm usually returns fairly readily.

There is a dangerous cocktail at the moment, of which organisers are aware and may exploit, notably, wide public resentment at limited employment and poor income-earning opportunities, sky-rocketing prices and inaccessible essential services, despite constant government announcements of prospective good economic times and new projects. Failing political processes and opportunities for peaceful public expression to pursue concerns hasn’t helped.

Inciting violence and intimidation is totally unacceptable, especially on grounds of race or ethnic group (including tribe), religion, gender, or superstition and cannot be excused by misconstrued custom. PNG’s leaders must stand up against it. A few, like Powes Parkop, are addressing issues of public concern, but it requires many more joining community activists for positive social change to occur, countering the current self-destructive tolerance of violence and associated ills.

The public is frustrated and some can be stirred up readily by manipulative individuals seeking scapegoats for the country’s problems. The problems are certainly NOT created, for example, by Asian micro-businesses, which mostly provide valuable services and some jobs for PNGans too. Most are also in partnership or just managers for PNG business owners. Instead, PNG’s problems are largely home-made, particularly abuses of process, notably the vast waste of public funds (as shown by Finance Inquiry, Auditor-General, Ombudsman and Public Accounts Committee), special concessions and inadequate natural resource oversight/enforcement, failure of government to provide broad-based health and education services and technical and practical skills training, or maintain rural roads, ports and airstrips or open State businesses and utilities to competition, needed to improve services, reduce costs and generate employment. Corruption in offices, like Lands and Migration, has resulted in multiple titles and public land being lost and visas issued improperly. It “takes two to tango”, and there are certainly corrupting businesses, but most are victims rather than perpetrators of corruption and seek open and corrupt-free investment conditions.

Making blanket threats to foreign micro-enterprises or employees, or specific ethnic groups is totally unacceptable, and undermines the stated aim of protecting PNG jobs. PNG already has a bad reputation for lawlessness, with crime as the most serious impediment to business and investment. Encouraging mobs to take the law into their own hands, apart from creating unnecessary fear and personal danger, would further undermine PNG's investment environment and income-earning and employment opportunities. Economic and social problems must be identified clearly and addressed head-on, not rushing off targeting largely innocent scapegoats, whether in the overseas business community or villages. Holding political and other public sector leaders to task and making them accountable should be step one, and demanding they lead constructively, rather than trail, in addressing the country's key social and economic issues, step two; this includes addressing PNG's scourges of corruption and wider maladministration, crime and gun culture, family and domestic violence and wider child welfare issues, social victimisation (including over accusations and kangaroo courts and tortures related to alleged sorcery). Various institutional changes are required, including, making the Police Commissioner publicly accountable, with such appointments independent of Government or political interests, to perform effectively, without fear or favour, including pursuing fraud charges against leaders.

Let's ensure that 31st December passes peacefully and make 2010 a year for positive change, with the country growing strong through common spirit and commitment, with good leaders having courage and standing up with the community to address crime and violence and the country's many other social, environmental and economic challenges.