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Time for leaders to condemn sorcery killings

PAPUA New Guineans do actually live in the 21st Century and use mobile phones, watch television, surf the net and drive to work in cars – we basically have technology at our finger tips. Just like other members of the global community we have become technological beings and respect the rights of others here and abroad to choose and to enjoy all that this world has to offer. After all that is enshrined in our Constitution and the law of the land is explicit in that there must be respect for the dignity of every individual. Respect for the rule of law and the rights of others are pillars of a modern-day democracy and we would like to think Papua New Guinea (PNG) falls under this category.

But when we hear stories of Papua New Guineans being accused of sorcery and burnt alive in a somewhat public spectacle, we recoil with fear and disgust and ask whether we should indeed be proud of ourselves as a nation of individuals who respect our fellow human beings and believe that justice is dispensed in a legally constituted court of law and not a kangaroo court chaired by individuals misled by superstition and trickery.

It is in this light we condemn in the strongest terms possible yesterday's gruesome burning of a woman suspected of sorcery in the Western Highlands capital, Mt Hagen. It is murder and we appeal to the Western Highlands police to immediately arrest and charge the perpetrators, at the top of their list should be the 'witch doctor' who claimed the woman and two others from Gumine, Chimbu Province caused the death of a six-year-old boy. Witch doctors and the so-called 'glass man' are nothing but con artists whose claims to possess magical powers are a sham designed to prey on unsuspecting Papua New Guineans.

Tragically, this is not the first sorcery-related killing in a Highlands province as human rights watchdogs Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch wrote to the PNG Government in 2009 to express concerns at similar killings. Their concerns at that time came on the back of 50 reported deaths in 2008 and the killing of another two in similar circumstances a year later.

The photographing of yesterday's brutal act by the crowd (including school children), without making moves to stop and condemn the murderers' actions, points to a bigger danger of ordinary Papua New Guineans accepting this callous killing as normal and this methodology of dispensing justice as acceptable.

The frequency in the occurrence of this barbaric act warrants the intervention of our political leaders, especially from the Highlands region where there has reportedly been an increase in similar cases in recent years. They must come out condemning this act and appeal to those who witnessed the crime to come forward and give information to police, which would lead to the arrest of the perpetrators.

Work by the PNG Constitutional and Law Reform Commission to repeal the Sorcery Act, which human rights groups believe is a key factor behind the 'prosecution' of alleged sorcerers and witchcraft, should also be fast-tracked and the necessary legislation put to parliament for this archaic law to be abolished once and for all.

Tsunami warning cancelled

By NELLIE SETEPANO

PAPUA New Guinea received tsunami warnings and alerts yesterday after a major 8.0 magnitude earthquake struck off Solomon Islands.

Almost two hours after the warning, the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre (PTWC) in Hawaii cancelled its warning and watch alerts for warning previously issued for Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Nauru, PNG, Tuvalu, New Caledonia, Kosrae, Fiji, Kiribati and Wallis and Futuna

The PTWC also cancelled

the watch previously issued for Marshall Islands, Howland and Baker, Phonpei, Tokelau, Samoa, Kermadec Islands, New Zealand, American Samoa, Tonga, Australia, Niue, Cook Islands, Indonesia, Wake Island, Chuuk, Jarvis Island, Guam, Northern Marianas, Palmyra Island, Yap, Johnston Island, Minamitorishima and Belau. A small tsunami wave measuring 0.9 metres reached parts of the Solomon Islands and watches were in effect as far afield as Hawaii, the PTWC said. According to US Geological Survey the quake

struck at 01.12 GMT near the Santa Cruz Islands in the Solomons, which have been hit by a series of strong tremors over the past week, at a depth of 5.8km.

The quake struck at a very shallow depth of only five kilometres and was located 347km east of Kira Kira in the Solomons. The Centre confirmed a tsunami was generated after the quake.

At approximately 1.16pm, the tsunami caused damages to villages south and west of Lata on the main Island of Santa Cruz Islands.

The National Weather Service in Port Moresby issued warnings and alerts for the New Guinea Islands, Milne Bay and Central provinces and the Momase region. Reacting to the alerts, PNG Ports temporary shut down all its ports in the Northern region at the time of warning. All operations were back to normal after the warning was cancelled. Also Milne Bay's disaster office wasted no time going on air through its provincial NBC station to warn coastal communities and outer islands of the impending tsunami.

Tei: Perpetrators are "uncivilised criminals"

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Relatives of the boy, also from Enga, were suspicious of the cause of his death and they sought the assistance of a so-called witch doctor.

The witch doctor reportedly identified the victim, together with two other elderly women from Gumine, Chimbu province, as the ones who had killed the boy through sorcery.

Eyewitness Henry Mamp said the relatives rounded up the three women early yesterday morning and interrogated them, using heated iron rods and other weapons.

"They assaulted the three women and asked them to confess.

"The two women from Gumine blamed the Engan

woman, saying she was the one who had removed the heart of the child and shared it with them," Mr Mamp said.

The relatives also assaulted the two women from Chimbu

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How can people be so stupid to act in such a barbaric manner ...

Teddy Tei
Highlands Police Commander

then proceeded to bind the Enga woman, doused her with petrol and set her alight.

Highlands divisional police

commander Teddy Tei condemned the brutal killing, describing the perpetrators as "uncivilised criminals" who will face the full force of the law. "How can people be so stupid to act in such a barbaric manner on mere suspicion of sorcery?" an angry ACP Tei said.

He said all those responsible will be arrested and charged, including the witch doctor.

This is not the first time for a Highlands province to report a sorcery-related killing.

According to Amnesty International (AI), there were more than 50 such deaths in 2008, and in 2009, a 40-year-old man from Unggai-Bena in the Eastern Highlands was hacked to death after a village court found him guilty of sorcery and sentenced him to death.

In the same year, a group of

men stripped a woman naked and burnt her alive at the Kerebug rubbish dump outside Mount Hagen after she was accused of witchcraft.

In January 2009, Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch sent letters to Justice Minister Dr Allan Marat and Police Commissioner Gari Baki expressing concerns about sorcery-related killings.

PNG's Constitutional and Law Reform Commission was working to repeal the Sorcery Act, after human rights groups reported an increase in false accusations of sorcery which led to killings.

But it is not known if the commission has completed its work and submitted its recommendations to government.

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