

Headline: [Violence threatens unequal spread of wealth](#)

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Page Name: Regional Focus

Publication Date: 05/06/1993

Publication: BT^BT

Page: 17

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## **Violence in Papua New Guinea threatens the unequal spread of wealth. By Ben Davies in Port Moresby**

IN DOWNTOWN Port Moresby and along the grubby beaches that surround the downtrodden capital of this resource-rich nation, unemployed youngsters sit around wasting their days. Houses are surrounded by barbed wire and at night, people rarely move far afield.

Even in the posh government offices in nearby Waigami, few people bother to conceal the current problems.

"Law and order is the single biggest challenge facing this country," said Stave Le Page, chief executive officer of the Tourist Promotion Authority. "Until we can solve that, foreign investors and tourists are going to remain extremely wary."

Since taking power, the government led by Prime Minister Paias Wingti has tried to tackle the problem by spending more on regional development, education, health, and law and order, and cutting wages to stem the urban influx. At the same time, there are plans to boost local industry so as to generate jobs and reduce reliance on expensive foreign imports.

"The aim is to treat the structural causes rather than the symptoms," said a government official. "We need to give our people a reason to live."

That, however, may prove difficult. For despite growing revenues from oil and gold exports, 70 per cent of the nation's people remain outside the real economy.

Massive divergence of wealth has led to protests, which have been further inflamed by the traditionally divided tribal society.

Just two months ago, riots shook the southern highlands provincial capital of Mendi following the murder of a university student.

Elsewhere, to stall violence, the government has banned drink in the province of Enga, while even the locals' great treat, beetle nut, has been banned from markets in Gordon, Boroko and Koki.

Nor have the police made matters better. In Port Moresby recently, after a policeman was shot outside a disco, his comrades returned to burn the building down.

Government ministers claim such events are isolated, taken out of context by the media and do not reflect the true situation. But few in Port Moresby are prepared to risk walking around at night.

Prospects for employment are unlikely to improve in the short term. Last year, the gross domestic product (GDP) share of agriculture, forestry and fisheries fell to 26 per cent, compared with more than 40 per cent in the 1970s. And with lower world prices for coffee and cocoa, availability of jobs could fall further.

Even the gold mines, which offer the biggest employment opportunities, have proved a mixed blessing, with attacks on power cables and petty sabotage by no means uncommon.

And while problems at the Mount Kare and Porgera mines have tended to be played down by the operators who seek to maintain strong relations with the government, workers claim that the situation is bad - and in many cases deteriorating.

"Everybody is just waiting for something to happen," says a senior official at Porgera. "With such massive divergence of wealth, this country is like a timebomb."

For members of the government, living behind barbed wire enclosures, the threat of violence may still seem remote. But unless the problem can be solved, and quickly, the country's rulers may soon get to experience it first-hand.