

In 2013, widespread publicity given to the deaths of two women accused of witchcraft in Papua New Guinea (PNG) drew international and national attention to the problem of sorcery and witchcraft accusation–related violence. In the face of mounting pressure to take action, including the [national haus kraï protest](#) calling for an end to violence against women, the government responded by repealing the *Sorcery Act 1971* and creating a new provision in the *Criminal Code Act 1974* (Chapter 262). Section 229A of the Criminal Code Act provides that any person who intentionally kills another person on account of an accusation of sorcery is guilty of wilful murder, for which the penalty is death. However, there is growing recognition, both within the government and the wider community, that these problems cannot be solved solely at a legislative level, and must rather involve a holistic response. This *In Brief* outlines the substance of, and steps leading to, a draft national action plan that was developed in June 2014 to provide a concrete foundation for this holistic response.

The first step in the development of the action plan was the holding of a conference titled ‘Sorcery and Witchcraft Accusations: Developing a National Response to Overcome the Violence’ in Goroka, PNG, in December 2013. It was convened by the PNG Department of Justice and Attorney General (DJAG), together with the Consultative Implementation and Monitoring Committee, and partners from the Melanesian Institute, the University of Goroka, State Society and Governance in Melanesia Program (SSGM), and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The conference followed from an earlier regional conference on the issue hosted by [SSGM in Canberra](#) in June 2013.¹

In the planning stages for the Goroka conference it was decided to focus on breaking the link between sorcery accusations and violence. This was a pragmatic decision that recognised that violence is the most problematic aspect of the beliefs in PNG today. It was also intended to allow some conceptual separation between the beliefs themselves and the violent responses to accusations of sorcery or witchcraft, although there is considerable debate about the extent to which this separation can in fact be made.

The latest development was a workshop on 12–13 June 2014 in Port Moresby in which participants drafted a national implementation plan to overcome sorcery and witchcraft-related violence. The 80 or so participants came from a range of government departments and civil society, church and academic organisations. Once finalised, the plan will be given to the PNG government and will form a blueprint for its response in this area. In his opening remarks to the workshop, Deputy Secretary of DJAG, Mr Jack Kariko, stated that the government stands ready to implement the recommendations of the workshop.

The workshop began with an outline of the findings from the Goroka conference and then a summary of the recent Church Partnership Program’s discussion of the issue. It was reported that the mainline churches do not currently have a common approach to the belief in sorcery and witchcraft, nor a clear idea about how to collectively approach the problems of violence associated with it. However, a number of committed churches and individuals are working on the issues and ongoing exploration of the possibilities of developing a united approach. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights also gave a presentation outlining three [recent reports by special rapporteurs](#) that discuss the problem of sorcery accusation–related violence in PNG. These reports have characterised the problem as a human rights violation, and have also noted the climate of impunity that exists in relation to it.

The draft action plan produced at the workshop adopts a comprehensive approach. It involves a number of government ministries and their departments, including the Department of Health, the Department of Education, the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary, the Department for Community Development and Religion, and DJAG. It also includes a range of non-government organisations, such as Oxfam, the Highlands Human Rights Defenders, the Family and Sexual Violence Action Committee’s networks, church organisation networks, and international development partners, such as DFAT and the United Nations.

The problem of violence arising from sorcery and witchcraft accusations was recognised by participants as being symptomatic of a range of social stresses.

These include declining health and education services, increased economic disparities as a result of the extractive industries, weakened local governance mechanisms, stresses on land, and population displacement. As such, the problems are tackled in the plan on two levels. On one level, the recommendations aim to treat some of these underlying issues, in particular health services and awareness about legal rights and responsibilities. On the other level, the recommendations are directed towards ameliorating the problems of violence that these stresses are causing. Although these responses deal only with the symptoms of the problems, and therefore may be criticised as being superficial, they were considered by participants as necessary to stop and alleviate the human suffering that is currently occurring.

The plan has five core areas: legal and protection, health, advocacy and communication, care and counselling, and research. Each area contains a few key recommendations and sets out concrete activities to be taken in both the short and medium term to implement the recommendations. The action plan also allocates specific responsibilities to particular departments and organisations, establishes time frames, and highlights the resources (human and financial) that are necessary or available to implement them. The key recommendations include:

Legal and protection

- Review which provisions repealed in the *Sorcery Act 1971* need to be re-enacted, and if any new laws are needed.
- Ensure that cases involving sorcery and witchcraft accusation–related violence move up through the criminal justice system and get into the Office of the Public Prosecutor.
- Develop mechanisms and awareness to ensure that the general population and service providers know what the law is, who has responsibility and authority to act, and how they can be contacted and mobilised.
- Extend village court training to include sorcery and witchcraft–accusation related violence.
- Develop a strategy for mediating sorcery and witchcraft accusations at the community level.

Health

- Raise community awareness about disease prevention.
- Upscale preventive health checks and screening, in combination with increased promotion about these services.

- Health workers to clearly explain the disease process to patients and their immediate families.

Advocacy and communication

- Advocate on the status of women, the vulnerable, and for the reduction of sorcery-related violence through posters, pamphlets, social media, and theatre productions that focus on the effects of sorcery-related violence on families, children and the community, and provide information about the legislation and related penalties.
- Send positive messages based on communities that have overcome violent responses in some way, rather than negative cultural messaging.

Care and counselling

- Improve counselling services for victims and communities affected by witchcraft and sorcery-related violence.
- Improve repatriation and support services for victims.
- Develop counselling and training programs for a range of service providers.
- Develop specific mechanisms for cases where children are involved.

Research

- Establish an evidence-based framework to address sorcery and witchcraft-related violence in PNG.
- Establish a central research hub for communication and networking.
- Develop research ethics.

It will take some time to see the extent to which the government and other stakeholders commit to, and then implement, the action plan. However, the commitment to developing a comprehensive approach to date is highly encouraging.

Author Notes

Miranda Forsyth is a fellow with SSGM and involved in a range of projects investigating the potential of, and challenges for, the inter-operation of state and non-state legal orders in Pacific island countries.

Endnote

- 1 See *In Brief* 2013/1, Miranda Forsyth, 'Witchcraft and Sorcery Related Killings in Melanesia: The Legal Issues'. The papers presented at both conferences will be coming out as a special issue of a journal and also as an edited book in the second half of 2014.

