

West Papuans in Papua New Guinea

Largely left without a support, refugees have no access to the most basic services.

In July 2023, work got underway at a refugee camp few people have ever heard of: Blackwara Camp, on the peripheries of a town called Vanimo, an agglomeration of fishing villages on the northwest coast of Papua New Guinea, a nation on the eastern half of New Guinea Island. The other half of this huge South Pacific Island, called West Papua, is in fact territory of Indonesia, and people have continuously trickled over the border into Papua New Guinea for decades – pushed by conflict. An initial wave of refugees arrived in Papua New Guinea in the 1980s, when Indonesian military and militias first started campaigns to root out West Papuan nationalist movements and fighters. Some 12,000 people arrived in that initial period, but scores of people continue to cross the border on a regular basis to this day, arriving with just the clothes on their backs. They receive almost no assistance from anyone, with the exception of what Catholic missions across Papua New Guinea quietly provide. In July, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), in partnership with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (CBCPNGSI), broke ground to develop a basic transit accommodation at Vanimo, one of the few existing arrival points for asylum seekers from West Papua though official reception centers.

The pilot project of nine months is due to be completed by end of April 2024. Funds will enable the CBCPNGSI, through the local bishop and parish, to purchase shelter materials and tools, food, cooking supplies, mattresses, clothing, blankets, gardening items, tanks and jerry cans for water storage and other supplies needed for a minimum standard of human dignity for people forced to flee their villages and homes. However, it is a stop-gap measure in a situation that needs what humanitarians call 'durable solutions,' because the 12,000 people who crossed the border in the 1980s have had children and now grand-children in Papua New Guinea, and, for two generations, some 2000 of them have lived without any status in squatter camps in the capital, Port Moresby, on the southeast coast. Thousands more are dispersed in settlements along the border, urban areas close to the border and the lowara-East Awin camp, a site originally established by UNHCR in 1989 and subsequently transferred to the government for refugee resettlement, but not far superior to the rudimentary set-up in Vanimo.

The two dioceses of Vanimo in the north and Daru/Kiunga in the south have had long standing dealings with the West Papuan refugees, spanning more than three decades. The local bishops have over these years taken responsibility to provide much needed help to these refugees. The bishops have been the brokers of negotiations between the refugees and the local communities and leaders. They try to support the children with some school fee assistance, allow the Catholic health services to provide free health checks and also donate food supply whenever there are big arrivals. In 2019 more than a hundred men, women and children crossed into PNG's southern border. Initially the government and partners responded with some help, but soon after the support stopped. The diocese of Daru/Kiunga offered to accommodate the refugees on church land and continued to provide food and health assistance, supported also by Caritas PNG. They were later relocated to the East Awin lowara refugee camp and left there to self-integrate.



Left: The new site (Yapsi) occupied by the 2019 arrivals. **Right:** M&R Desk Director (right) in company of three West Papuan refugees starting the 40km journey by boat from Kiunga. *Photo:* Courtesy of M&R Desk

The history of the West Papuan refugees in PNG has been marked by stop-start interventions by government, the UNHCR and other stakeholders. The Catholic church has been there for the refugees up to now, building schools and hospitals, church and being with them right where there are.

Since the establishment of the Migrants and Refugees Desk of the CBCPNGSI in 2021, efforts have been made to connect more meaningfully with the West Papuan refugees. Through this establishment, it is hoped that better and coordinated efforts will be made to support refugees in PNG, including the West Papuans.

CBCPNGSI is committed to supporting West Papuan refugees in PNG.

Port Moresby hosts about 200 West Papuan families in total, dispersed across the city in nine different informal camps, squatting on land but having no legal right to stay there. Rainbow and Waigani camps, the other two major camps in Port Moresby, are staked out where wastewater and run-off drain out of the city, but during the rainy season the waters can wash back into the camp, with all that entails in terms of hygiene and mosquito-borne diseases.

Yet according to Papua New Guinea's Immigration and Citizenship Authority (ICA), at the end of 2015, only 2,721 refugees had been registered in the country's Western Province. This is the most recent data available on the government's website. However, according to conservative estimates, the total number of West Papuans in Papua New Guinea is 15,000 or more, factoring in some natural population growth, and despite commitments to regularize them, there has been little progress.

There is no national policy to address the issue of West Papuans in Papua New Guinea, despite they have been here for forty years," said Jason Siwat, Director of the Migrants and Refugees Desk of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. The Migrants and Refugees (M&R) Desk is supporting the residents of Hohola with legal assistance, having

engaged a law firm to prevent them from being evicted while advocating for their right to remain on the land before the National Court. Given the lack of pro-bono legal services in PNG and the high cost of legal fees, the M&R Desk's effort is hugely constrained. Despite these limitations, it has taken carriage of the matter since 2022. It has managed to meet part of the legal fees through a collection of small donations from the Catholic Bishops Conference emergency fund, the Sisters of St. Josephs in Sydney, and other smaller donations. The case is now at stage for a final trial, and we hope the decision will be in our favor.

According to Sonny Karubaba the camp leader for Hohola, the intervention by the M&R Desk has greatly relieve them of the stress and difficulty in affording a proper attorney to represent them. But importantly it gives them some relief and security to continue to live there with their children and not to be worried about the threat of eviction. In the meantime, regulations prevent them from building or developing the site in any way, so long as the case remains unresolved. And so the 21 families remained cramped in the overcrowded home. The extended families, now spanning several generations, all use one pit latrine and share one designated area for cooking, doing laundry and showering on what is a lot with two improvised structures, which have been added to with makeshift material, such as cardboard boxes, plywood, and sheet metal. While it is less than ideal, the families in Hohola have been fighting eviction notices since 2016, because one business owns the blocks on either side of their settlement, and that business also wants the piece of land in between for development. Despite the Hohola residents practically sleeping on top of one another, or in the skeletons of old cars, they are fighting for it because it is the only home they have.

Also, with the funding support from the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), the M&R Desk is completing a project that was aimed at recognizing the dignity of West Papuan refugees in PNG. Under this project, small WaSH infrastructure have been installed for camps in Port Moresby. For Rainbow camp, which holds the biggest number of West Papuan refugees in Port Moresby, the installation of two toilet facilities was a timely relief to the community there. The septic toilets which have designated rooms for men and women offers more privacy and security than the patchwork pit toilet they have been using for years. Rainbow hosts more than 60 families cramped up together in a patch of wasteland since 2007 after they have been evicted from a previous location. Rainbow camp leader expressed his gratitude for this vital service saying, "this is the first time an organization has helped build a proper septic toilet that we'll be using as normal human beings..., healthy living is paramount and many of us have died from diseases that were related to our lifestyle and how we are living."



Left: Two refugees installing the latrine at Rainbow camp. **Right:** Refugee leader cutting the ribbon for the new latrine.
Photo: Courtesy of M&R Desk

Similar support has been provided to Hohola and 9-mile camps, while Tete settlement and Gereka, receive water tanks. Among these refugees are a group of men, most of them not married and have no immediate family support. They are some of the first West Papuans to arrive in PNG in the 1960s and 1980s as young men. They are now over 60 years old. Most of them subsist by selling firewood, collecting and selling empty cans, and newspapers which can fetch them about 4 to 6 dollars a day. Through the funding from ICMC we are providing these men a meagre \$20 per month to help them get basics they need, including medication and food. However, the project is expected to end in June 2024, and we would again look for assistance to enable us to continue to support these vulnerable group of men. Two of them have sadly passed away in the last few months, and we provided a little bit of financial assistance for the members of the community to organize proper burials.

In its effort to try address the acute poverty affecting the West Papuan refugees, the M&R Desk has also launched a business development program under the same funding from ICMC. Twenty young people representing 6 main camps in Port Moresby have been trained in financial literacy. The second phase of this program which will commence at the end of April 2024 would see 6 leaders out of the 20 undergoing a one-month business launch program. The aim is to support and empower them to establish small and medium enterprises for each camp as a way of providing some form of employment for themselves and at the same time to empower them to become productive communities.

Support us.

M&R Desk is a small team of only two staff and limited financial capacity doing our best to serve people without roots in PNG, in particular refugees and migrants. Any amount of donation to support us would make a huge difference in the lives of those that the world knows little about.

If you would like to support our work, you can reach us by:

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