

Accused Witch Burned Alive as Hundreds Watch in Papua New Guinea

In a horrible, unthinkable act, an angry mob in a Papua New Guinea town stripped, tortured and bound a woman accused of witchcraft before burning her alive in front of hundreds of witnesses, the Associated Press reports.

Hundreds of bystanders, including children, looked on—and some took photographs—at one of the highest profile sorcery-related murders in this South Pacific island nation.

Relatives of a 6-year-old boy, who died in a hospital the day before, accused Kepari Leniata, 20, of sorcery. The mother of an 8-month-old girl was tortured with a hot iron rod, bound, doused in gasoline, then set on fire on top of a pile of car tires and trash in the Western Highland provincial capital of Mount Hagen, according to national spokesman Dominic Kakas. This was the first sorcery-related murder in Papua New Guinea in a year, he said.

As many as 50 people are suspected of beating the victim, while the prime suspect—her husband—has fled the area. Mount Hagen police, who say they could not control the mob, have not made any arrests. Deputy Police Commissioner Simon Kauba criticized investigators for this on Friday.

“He was very, very disappointed that there’s been no arrest made as yet,” the AP reported Kakas as saying.

Kakas also said the public was not cooperating with police, and police carrying out the investigation were not working hard enough.

“The incident happened in broad daylight in front of hundreds

of eyewitnesses and yet we haven't picked up any suspects yet. [Kauba] was very, very curious about that and he blasted the investigators on the phone," he said.

The country's biggest circulating newspapers, *The National* and *Post-Courier*, ran gruesome photos on their front pages, while Prime Minister Peter O'Neill, police and diplomats condemned the murder.

"It is reprehensible that women, the old and the weak in our society, should be targeted for alleged sorcery or wrongs that they actually have nothing to do with," O'Neill said.

Police Commissioner Tom Kulunga, who described the killing as "shocking and devilish" said in a statement, "We are in the 21st century and this is totally unacceptable."

The U.S. Embassy in the national capital Port Moresby issued a statement, calling for international attention to the issue of gender-based violence.

"This incident once again highlights the need for comprehensive action to address the pervasive global problem of gender-based violence," the statement read. "The United States calls for a sustained international partnership to address this issue throughout the Pacific, including through the creation and enforcement of anti-gender-based violence laws, the enhancement of prevention and response efforts, and the reduction of stigma and harmful practices."