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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[12 May 2017]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Sorcery-related violence and killing in Papua New Guinea has to stop

A social and cultural problem has emerged in Papua New Guinea over the past few years, connected to the widespread belief of sorcery and black magic, called *Sanguma* in Tok Pisin. The numbers of torture and killings of accused witches and sorcerers are rising, with the government of Papua New Guinea and the states providing development aid doing nothing to stop it.

Sanguma describes the belief that some people in a community have supernatural powers they use to harm other people. Many communities in Papua New Guinea are still very scared of these sorcerers. In the case of an unexpected death, illness or accident, the people do not ask for the medical explanation for what happened, but make sure to find the person responsible for the event. The community then blames a person, often a woman, to be a witch and to have cursed the dead or ill person. Classified as the witch or sorcerer can be anyone who acted strange or weird during the last days before the incident. Subsequently, the accused witch or sorcerer often gets tortured with the whole community taking part in that and will most likely be killed in the end. The torture and killing methods vary and go from burning the accused alive, over hacking them to death with bush knives and machetes to torturing them to death with hot irons. The men and women who survive, are marked and burdened for life, they have to leave their village and hide far away from home.

Since most of the incidents take place in the unreachable highlands, it is hard to estimate a specific number of cases. The Constitutional and Law Reform Commission of Papua New Guinea states a total of 150 cases per year, but estimates of other institutions are going much higher. National human and women rights activists are sure there are new sorcery-related killings every day. Despite the high number of cases, there is almost no prosecution of sorcery-related violence. As often the whole community takes part in the killing, witnesses do not come forward to report the incidents to the police. And as the police is missing resources like enough cars to reach the remote areas, in most cases there is no investigation at all. The impunity of the murderers strengthens the view of the perpetrators as protectors of the community who fight against the evil.

A second problem that supports the practice of sorcery-related violence is the unclear lawful aspect. Until 2013, the so called Sorcery Act criminalized the use of Sanguma and any other form of black sorcery. Anything connected to black magic, like the possession of magic object or the call to participate in sorcery would be punished with imprisonment. At the same time, the Sorcery Act gave murderers of accused sorcerers the chance to a reduced sentence as sorcery was considered a provocation. This act was repealed in 2013. Since then it has been illegal to kill a person on the accusation of sorcery, but that change did not reach all communities of Papua New Guinea. And most of them are not even interested in what the law is, since it is not enforced anyway. In some cases the repeal of the law even strengthened the hunt on witches and sorcerers, as the community felt like they had to take law in their own hands now.

In 2015, the government of Papua New Guinea officially accepted a plan developed by different stakeholders in 2013 to end sorcery-related violence, the Sorcery National Action Plan (SNAP). This plan wants to address the practice from different angles, focusing on “Care and Counselling”, “Advocacy and Communications”, “Legal and Protection”, “Health” and “Research” to achieve a

holistic solution. But since 2015 the government did not take any further steps to implement the plan. There are no approaches to bettering the law enforcement in these cases, there are no projects to educate the population about health issues and there is no improved protection for victims and witnesses. The numbers of cases are rising and the government and the many countries having development programs in Papua New Guinea are not working on stopping that.

There are many human rights activists, community workers and church leaders in Papua New Guinea who are trying to fight sorcery-related violence. They are working on implementing the Sorcery National Action Plan in their regions, they develop Urgent Actions Groups, they save accused sorcerers just before getting killed again and again and keep them safe, risking their own lives every day. Many of them receive death threats for helping the accused. These people are completely on their own and do not receive any help from the government or any other organizations to continue their work.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to urgently ask the government of Papua New Guinea and all States having bilateral or multilateral development programs in Papua New Guinea:

- to implement the Sorcery National Action Plan,
 - to improve the law enforcement sector to make sure incidents are investigated and perpetrators are punished,
 - to improve the education on health matters to achieve a better understanding of illness and death in the population,
 - to support local human rights and community workers that are working on reducing sorcery-related violence,
 - to start programs to raise awareness of the problematic topic in the communities.
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