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Papua New Guinea: Appalling violence against six women in Easter ‘witch-hunt’

Authorities in Papua New Guinea must take urgent action to prevent and punish ‘sorcery’-related violence, following reports six women and a man were abducted and subjected to acts of appalling cruelty by a group who accused them of witchcraft.

Komape Lap from the Southern Highlands claims he and six women had their hands tied, were stripped naked and had hot iron rods pushed into their genitals. Komape Lap escaped but the fate of the six women is unknown.

The attack is reported to have taken place on 28 March in an Easter ‘witch-hunt’, according to local media. The police have confirmed they are investigating the incident.

“The priority must be to find out the fate of the six women. The perpetrators must also be brought to justice for the abduction and crimes of sexual and other violence, if confirmed”, said Kate Schuetze, Amnesty International’s Pacific researcher.

“The government must take urgent action to prevent any further ‘sorcery’-related violence and must also provide the survivors with support and full access to health and other services” said Kate Schuetze.

“Sorcery is often used as pretext to commit violence against women. Repealing the Sorcery Act is one of the first urgent steps the authorities must take towards preventing further horrific attacks.”

Last month, PNG’s Constitutional and Law Reform Commission also called on the government to repeal the Sorcery Act 1971, which criminalizes the practice of ‘forbidden sorcery’.

The reports are the latest in a series of attacks against people accused of ‘sorcery’, which in most cases have resulted in women being murdered.

In February, twenty-year-old Kepari Leniata was stripped, tied up, doused in petrol and burned alive by relatives of a young boy she was accused of using witchcraft to kill. Two people were charged as a result of this incident.

The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women has noted that women, particularly widows or women without family to protect them, are disproportionately affected by ‘sorcery’- related violence in PNG.

Amnesty International urges the authorities to adopt measures to prevent all forms of violence against women including passing the Family Protection Bill which was approved by Cabinet yesterday.