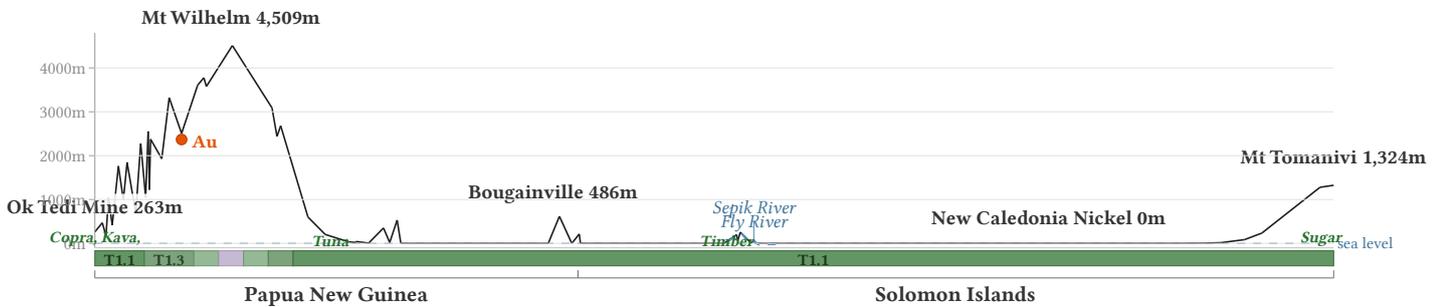


Prayer Briefing

Melanesia

Papua New Guinea · Fiji · Solomon Islands · Vanuatu · New Caledonia 12.6 million people

2026-03-19



This Week

Mar 18 Papua New Guinea

Tropical Cyclone Upia tracked south of Sudest Island with gusts up to 106 km/h, threatening Woodlark, Sudest, Misima and Rossel Islands in Milne Bay Province with flooding and dangerous sea conditions — remote island communities whose food security depends on garden crops and reef fisheries.

Mar 12 Vanuatu

Ambae volcano in northern Vanuatu continues erupting, with explosions, ash fall, and sulphur dioxide gas emissions since mid-February affecting communities on the volcanic island — families who evacuated in 2018 are once again weighing whether to leave.

Mar 10 Vanuatu

Ambae volcano activity continues with ash fall, SO₂ gas emissions, and seismic tremors, affecting both agriculture and water sources for island communities. Separately, a pertussis outbreak continues across Vanuatu with new cases reported.

Mar 02 Papua New Guinea

Illegal miners from the Sakar tribe engaged in a shootout with security forces at Porgera mine in Enga Province — two miners killed attempting to access a restricted facility. The following day, the tribe destroyed the highway connecting Laiagam to Porgera by digging a 6-foot ditch and felling trees across the road.

The Place

Papua New Guinea's highlands are one of the last places on earth where 85% of the population still feeds itself from gardens — sweet potato, taro, yam, and banana cultivated in a rotation system developed 9,000 years ago without an agrochemical or a factory in sight. The Sepik River floodplain supports communities who harvest sago palm, fish the river, and trade ceremonial art across exchange networks that have connected villages for millennia. On the coast and across the archipelagos of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, reef fishing and customary tenure sustain communities whose relationship to the sea predates any colonial legal system.

What Is Breaking

The gold beneath Enga Province is extracted by Barrick Gold and China's Zijin Mining, leaving Ipile landowners displaced and women near the mining camps subject to violence documented by Human Rights Watch. In March, illegal miners from the Sakar tribe were shot by mine security forces, and the tribe responded by destroying the Laiagam-Porgera highway — the cycle of extraction, exclusion, and retaliation that defines the Porgera relationship. At Kompiam District Hospital, armed men entered a ward and killed two patients from a rival clan — the hospital closed for a week. The Ok Tedi mine dumped 80 million tonnes of tailings directly into the Fly River — poisoning fisheries for 50,000 downstream people — and when BHP decided the liability was too great, it divested rather than remediate. Malaysian-owned logging companies clear primary forest in PNG and Solomon Islands at 1-3% per year, shipping raw logs to China while the rivers downstream fill with sediment and the reefs suffocate. This week, Tropical Cyclone Upia struck PNG's Milne Bay outer islands with 106 km/h gusts, and Ambae volcano in northern Vanuatu continues coating the island in ash and sulphur dioxide while families decide whether to evacuate and lose their gardens or stay and breathe the gas.

The Stakes

Gold, tuna, timber, and sugar leave these islands. The poisoned rivers, cleared forests, depleted reefs, and 84,000 people displaced by tribal conflict in PNG's highlands stay. Hundreds of women marched to PNG's Parliament demanding protection — in a country where the ground itself is being taken from under their feet. The asymmetry is not incidental — it is the logic of the arrangement.

34

84K

people killed

displaced

food insecure

Precipitation 224% of normal; temperatures +2.1°C above baseline.

Lives Lived Here

Melanesia

Before dawn in the Western Highlands of PNG, a woman from the Enga community opens the gate to her garden — on land her clan has farmed for generations — and begins clearing a new section for sweet potato. The soil is volcanic and deep. The garden requires no fertiliser, no corporation, no licence. She will share the harvest with her sisters' families, trade the surplus at the Wabag market, and save the best tubers for replanting. Her husband's brother works at the Porgera mine — one of the 2,500 locals employed out of a surrounding population of 50,000 — and sends money back when he can, but the real economy of this household is the garden and the pig exchange that binds this clan to its neighbours.

Three days downstream by dugout canoe, on the Fly River, a fisherman mends a net that catches less each year. The river once gave him everything: fish, transport, water, protein for the school. The sediment and copper residue from Ok Tedi mine's tailings — 80 million tonnes of it — have changed the river's chemistry and smothered the spawning beds. He still fishes because there is nothing else. The mine is still operating.

On the reef off Malaita in Solomon Islands, a woman who holds customary fishing rights to the same stretch of water her grandmother held checks the traps she set yesterday. The reefs here are still healthy — her community has maintained a no-take zone around the spawning aggregation for thirty years, enforcing it against outside fishers through a combination of traditional authority and the occasional confrontation. Her brother is fighting the logging concession that a company from Kuala Lumpur is trying to push through the Kwaio interior; if they succeed, the sediment from the logging roads will reach this reef within five years.

In Port Vila, a ni-Vanuatu man returns from six months picking fruit in Queensland under Australia's PALM scheme — employer-tied visa, shared accommodation, wages that looked generous in the contract but less so after deductions. The money he sent home kept his children in school and his mother's garden replanted after the last cyclone. His wife managed both while he was away.

Gold, tuna, timber, and copra leave Melanesia each year worth hundreds of millions at international market prices. What does not come back is the Fly River's chemistry, the primary forest canopy of Guadalcanal's interior, the inshore fish stocks that fed coastal communities for three millennia, or the 80 million tonnes of Ok Tedi tailings currently working their way through the catchment.

What Presses

The weight on Melanesia

Milne Bay Outer Islands, Papua New Guinea — Tropical Cyclone Upia struck on March 18 with 106 km/h gusts, threatening Woodlark, Sudest, Misima, and Rossel Islands with flooding and dangerous seas. These are among the most remote communities in PNG — their food security depends on garden crops and reef fisheries that cyclones can destroy in hours, and their distance from the mainland means help arrives last. The people on these islands live at the end of every supply chain and the beginning of every storm.

Ambae Island, Vanuatu — One of the most active volcanoes in the Pacific has been erupting since mid-February, coating this island in northern Vanuatu with ash and sulphur dioxide. The families who live here have already evacuated once — in 2018, the entire island was cleared; they came back to find their gardens destroyed and their animals dead. Now they are deciding again. The ash smothers the crops. The SO₂ makes the **water** unsafe. The seismic tremors come at night. Ambae is one of the places in the world where the ground itself is an active participant in human life, and where the decision about whether to stay or go carries consequences that will take years to unfold.

Fly River, Papua New Guinea — The Ok Tedi **copper-gold** mine in Western Province dumped an estimated 80 million tonnes of mine tailings directly into the Fly River system — one of the largest deliberate releases of mining waste into a river system anywhere on earth. The 50,000 people who depend on the Fly River for fish, **water**, and livelihood watched their fisheries collapse and their river turn toxic. BHP, the original operator, decided in 2002 that the environmental liability was too large and divested its shares. The mine continues to operate under PNG government ownership. The river has not recovered. BHP has not returned.

Melanesia exports its resources as raw commodities and retains the environmental cost in perpetuity. Ok Tedi exported copper and gold for decades; the 80 million tonnes of tailings in the Fly River cannot be exported and will not be removed. Solomon Islands logs arrive in China as raw timber; the deforested hillsides and silted rivers stay in Solomon Islands. The asymmetry is not incidental — it is the defining logic of the extractive relationship.

The communities who bear the cost of extraction in Melanesia — Ipiili landowners at Porgera, Fly River fishing communities, Guadalcanal customary landowners — have the weakest standing to contest it. At Porgera, the Sakar tribe's only leverage was to destroy the highway; at Kompiam, clan violence entered the hospital ward itself. Customary land tenure provides protection against permanent alienation but not against the incremental manipulation of concession agreements that offer immediate cash for long-term rights. The companies who negotiate these agreements have lawyers; the communities who sign them frequently do not.

The Ok Tedi mine dumped 80 million tonnes of tailings into the Fly River. The communities downstream received nothing and lost everything the river gave them. BHP divested. The mine continues. The river does not forget.

For Prayer

Melanesia

For the families of Ambae island...

For the communities of Ambae in northern Vanuatu — deciding whether to evacuate as the volcano erupts for the second time in eight years, ash covering their gardens and sulphur dioxide making the water unsafe. For those who remember 2018, and for the ones making the same decision again.

For the communities of the Fly River...

For the 50,000 people whose fisheries were destroyed by Ok Tedi mine tailings — the fishermen who still cast nets into a river whose chemistry has been permanently altered, the children who grow up without the protein the river once provided. That what cannot be undone is at least acknowledged.

For the 84,000 displaced in PNG's highlands...

For the 84,000 people displaced by tribal conflict in Papua New Guinea — unable to tend their gardens, disconnected from the subsistence systems that require physical presence on the land. That conflict ends, that they return, and that what drove the conflict is addressed rather than simply suspended.

For the Ipili landowners at Porgera...

For the Ipili people of Enga Province on whose land the Porgera mine operates — still negotiating compensation agreements against corporations with teams of lawyers, still carrying the documented experience of violence against women by mine security that no court has yet resolved.

For customary landowners facing logging concessions...

For the customary landowners of Solomon Islands and PNG who signed logging agreements they now wish to reverse — families who received cash for rights that turned out to be irreversible, watching rivers run brown and reefs die downstream.

For reef fishing communities...

For the coastal communities across Melanesia whose protein security depends on reef fisheries declining from bleaching, sedimentation, and industrial overfishing — the women gleaning shellfish on reef flats, the families whose daily food depends on what the net brings in.

For the islands in Tropical Cyclone Upia's path...

For the communities on Woodlark, Sudest, Misima, and Rossel Islands in PNG's Milne Bay Province — remote islands facing 106 km/h winds, flooding, and dangerous seas, where food security depends on garden crops and reef fisheries that cyclones can destroy in hours, and where distance from the mainland means help arrives last.

For the women who marched to Parliament...

For the hundreds of women in Port Moresby who marched to Parliament House in March demanding tougher laws against gender-based violence — joined by church groups and women's organizations, in a country where mine security guards, soldiers, and armed men commit documented violence against women with near-total impunity. That their voices are heard and their demands met.

Seeds of Hope

Customary land tenure — the principle that land belongs to communities, not individuals or states, and cannot be permanently alienated — remains the most powerful protection Melanesian communities have against extractive encroachment. In Vanuatu, 98% of land is customarily held; communities have blocked resort and plantation developments by asserting kastom rights that no foreign investor has been able to override. In PNG, hundreds of women marched to Parliament House in Port Moresby in March to protest the rise in gender-based violence — joined by church groups and women's organizations, they demanded tougher laws for violence against women and girls, in a country where mine sites and military barracks generate documented patterns of sexual violence. The Bougainville independence movement forced the closure of the Panguna copper mine through armed struggle and

produced a 2019 referendum returning 98% for independence — demonstrating that even the Pacific's most heavily capitalised mining operation can be halted when communities bear the cost of stopping it. The Forum Fisheries Agency's Vessel Day Scheme, through which Pacific nations collectively auction access to their EEZs, has increased tuna revenue — imperfectly, but more than individual negotiation ever achieved.

Looking Ahead

Tropical Cyclone Upia is the immediate threat — Milne Bay's outer islands face flooding and dangerous seas, and communities on Woodlark, Sudest, Misima and Rossel Islands depend on garden crops and reef fisheries that cyclones can flatten. Ambae volcano requires continued monitoring; evacuation decisions hang over families whose gardens are already ash-covered. The wet season continues through April with elevated cyclone risk across all five countries. In PNG, the highland tribal conflict that killed over 200 in Enga Province in 2024 has not resolved — the Porgera mine shootout in March and the subsequent highway blockade by the Sakar tribe show how mining, clan identity, and violence remain locked together. The 84,000 displaced will not return to their gardens until it ends, and the June 2026 provincial elections risk further escalation.

Psalm 130 (De Profundis)

*Out of the depths have I cried to you, O Lord;
Lord, hear my voice;
let your ears consider well
the voice of my supplication.*

Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world: grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross we may triumph in the power of his victory; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

As you read this briefing on Melanesia, consider:

- 1. What connects your daily life to this crisis?*
- 2. What would it mean to accept this contradiction—that your comfort and their suffering exist in the same global system—rather than trying to resolve it from the outside?*

Carry This

What to bring with you from this briefing

Barrick Gold and China's Zijin Mining operate the New Porgera Ltd gold mine in PNG's Enga Province under an agreement signed in 2023 intended to improve Ipili landowner compensation after years of documented abuses. The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre tracks corporate accountability allegations against Barrick at Porgera — including Human Rights Watch's 2011 documentation of sexual violence by mine security guards. These are searchable at business-humanrights.org.

Solomon Islands exports 85% of its logs to China as raw timber. The EU Timber Regulation and US Lacey Act require importers to verify legal origin of timber. Malaysian-linked companies operating in Solomon Islands have been the subject of Global Witness investigations documenting concession manipulation and illegal logging. If you buy tropical hardwood furniture, the due diligence requirements and investigation records are at globalwitness.org.

The Bougainville independence vote (98% for independence from PNG in 2019) was partly driven by the environmental devastation of the Panguna copper mine, operated by Rio Tinto subsidiary Bougainville Copper Ltd. Bougainville's path to formal independence is in negotiation. Rio Tinto's liability position — one of the Pacific's worst environmental disasters — is documented in its public shareholder filings and the Bougainville government's remediation demands.