Land

Papua New Guinea is located to the north of Australia and is our closest neighbour. The climate is tropical, with high temperature and humidity levels. Tropical forests which covered much of the country are rapidly being logged. At the same time, the connections between people and their land are very significant and central to their identity.

People

PNG is the most linguistically diverse nation in the world with over 700 indigenous languages spoken. However, the dominant language is Melanesian Pidgin, and English is the official language. Christianity and indigenous animist beliefs are the main spiritual beliefs. One of the challenges for the people of PNG is to reconcile their traditional way of life with the modern, urban lifestyles that have been recently introduced.

History

Archaeological evidence indicates that humans arrived on New Guinea at least 60,000 years ago. In 1885, the eastern half of the island was divided between Germany (north) and England (south). During World War I (1914-18), Australia occupied the German area, and continued to administer the combined areas until independence in 1975. Australia continues to have ongoing ties with the country.

Economy

Many tribes in the isolated mountainous interior have little contact with each other, let alone with the outside world. However, there is an increasing urban population. About 80% of the population is dependent on subsistence agriculture. A small proportion of the land is suitable for growing cash crops, including coffee, copra and cocoa.

PNG has extensive mineral deposits - including gold, copper and nickel - but the rugged terrain and inadequate infrastructure (poor roads, communications) make mining difficult. There are significant reserves of oil and natural gas and the country has hopes of becoming a significant energy exporter. Oil, copper and gold account for two-thirds of export earnings. Australian Government aid (A$355 million in 2007-8) is also a significant source of income and includes training for skilled and responsible leadership.
Living conditions

Some 80% of Papua New Guinea's people live in rural areas with few facilities. The main problems are access to basic health and education services. Roads often don't exist or are of a poor standard. They are hard to maintain because of the high rainfall and easily eroded soil. People must walk long distances to get to school or reach a medical care centre.

Health services, especially in rural areas are poor. Lack of access to safe water and even less access to adequate sanitation mean that communicable diseases like diarrhoea and malaria are major causes of illness and death, especially in young children.

Malnutrition, HIV and AIDS and the use of tobacco and alcohol are increasing problems. People living in rural areas live in a variety of traditional housing made from bush materials while people living in towns tend to live in western-style housing. Food consists of what can be grown in gardens – sweet potato, taro and greens supplemented by meat (mainly pig) and imported tinned fish and rice. Rapid population growth is another source of social and economic pressure, especially in urban areas.

Education

Education is highly valued by the people of PNG. However, the public education system is poorly funded and under-resourced – particularly in the more remote areas. Approximately 30% of children never attend a primary school.

Positively, there are moves to expand the use of tok ples (local language) in education programs. Also, there are increasing efforts to improve teacher training and make the curriculum more relevant to student needs.