

Massive gas plant resumes operations after severe PNG quake

April 13 2018



February's quake was the most powerful to hit Papua New Guinea in a century

ExxonMobil's massive gas project has resumed operations in Papua New Guinea after a major earthquake damaged the plant, the US energy giant said Friday, in a boost for the Pacific nation as it rebuilds after the

devastation.

More than 125 people were killed and many more injured after the 7.5-magnitude tremor hit the country's mountainous interior on February 26, cutting off villages and knocking out power.

The quake also damaged facilities at the US\$19 billion PNG LNG project operated by ExxonMobil, the impoverished country's biggest-ever development, in the remote Southern Highlands region.

"Resuming LNG production ahead of our projected eight-week timeframe is a significant achievement for ExxonMobil, our joint-venture partners and our customers," ExxonMobil Development Company president Neil Duffin said in a statement.

"We will continue to support those communities impacted by the earthquake as we work toward fully restoring our operations."

The firm said that LNG exports were expected to resume soon.

PNG's economic growth is heavily dependent on its natural resources, and the resumption of operations would be a relief to authorities.

The country was also boosted by news from ExxonMobil on Thursday that the amount of gas believed to be held at the P'nyang field in the Western Province was 4.36 trillion cubic feet, a 84 percent jump from a 2012 assessment.

This meant there was a potential "significant expansion of operations" in PNG, the company said.

There are regular earthquakes in PNG, which sits on the so-called Pacific Ring of Fire—a hotspot for seismic activity due to friction

between tectonic plates.

The February quake was described by Australian officials as the biggest to hit the highland region in a century, with countless aftershocks also rattling residents.

Some traumatised villagers had told local media they were suspicious of the plant's operators and fearful they might have been using hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, and destabilised the rock structure underneath.

Prime Minister Peter O'Neill has said there was no evidence the energy developments were linked to the quake, but asked the Australian government to conduct an independent review into its causes.

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Citation: Massive gas plant resumes operations after severe PNG quake (2018, April 13) retrieved 20 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-04-massive-gas-resumes-severe-png.html>

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