

# Papua New Guineans express outrage at Biden’s ‘very offensive’ claim about deceased uncle and cannibals

By Brady Knox

President [Joe Biden](#) is catching flak from Papua New Guinea after implying his uncle was eaten by cannibals in the country during [World War II](#).

On Wednesday, Biden [told](#) a story of how his uncle, Ambrose Finnegan, was shot down while flying a reconnaissance mission around Papua New Guinea in World War II, crashing in an area infested with cannibals. The story contradicted all records about Finnegan’s crash, which found that he actually crashed in the ocean due to engine failure. He also claimed a new search had found pieces of the plane when he visited the country — which he never did.



New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Hipkins, right, visits at Gordon’s Market in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, Monday, May 22, 2023. Hipkins met with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken who traveled in President Joe Biden’s place. (AP Photo/Nick Perry)

The remarks have caused yet another diplomatic incident with the strategic Pacific nation. Many residents and academics said Biden's comments played into bigoted assumptions about the country, particularly that it's a backward island nation populated by cannibals.

"The Melanesian group of people, who Papua New Guinea is part of, are a very proud people," Michael Kabuni, a lecturer in political science at the University of Papua New Guinea, [told](#) the *Guardian*. "And they would find this kind of categorization very offensive. Not because someone says, 'Oh there used to be cannibalism in PNG' — yes, we know that, that's a fact."

"But taking it out of context, and implying that your [uncle] jumps out of the plane and somehow we think it's a good meal is unacceptable," he added. "They wouldn't just eat any white men that fell from the sky."

Economics lecturer Maholopa Laveil with the University of Papua New Guinea said that Biden's remarks were likely to make already strained relations between the country and the United States worse. Biden caused a diplomatic rift last year when he canceled a visit to the country, interpreted by many as a slight.

"It paints PNG in a bad light. PNG has already had a lot of negative press around riots and tribal fighting and this doesn't help, and [the claims are] unsubstantiated," Laveil said of Biden's cannibal remarks. "For a U.S. president to say that — particularly after a lot of deals have been struck with PNG and the work they've been doing in the Pacific — even off the cuff, I don't think that should have been said at all."

Despite widespread outrage, some in Papua New Guinea were more inclined to give Biden the benefit of the doubt.

"I am lost for words actually," East Sepik Gov. Allan Bird, a leading opposition politician, said. "I don't feel offended. It's hilarious really. I am sure when Biden was a child, those are the things he heard his parents say. And it probably stuck with him all his life."

Papua New Guinea has emerged as a strategically important country, with its rising population, natural resources, and potential role as an ally against an expanding China, earning it the [interest](#) of Washington.