The news of the murder of a 20-year-old woman, Kepari Leniata , from Papua New Guinea for witchcraft has made headlines across the world. Leniata's relatives accused her of killing a boy through sorcery. They 'tortured her with a hot iron, stripped her naked, tied up her hands and legs and threw her into the fire in front of hundreds of people'. Police and firefighters were at the scene but couldn't save her life. The lynch mob outnumbered them. Belief in witchcraft and sorcery is very strong in Papua New Guinea. Witch killing is widespread in this former Australian colony.

Every year, hundreds of people mainly women are murdered because of belief in witchcraft. Women are made out to be the scapegoats for the ills many people in the country suffer. These killings take place mainly in rural communities where belief in superstition and magic is very strong. Modern education and development, including the introduction in 1971 of the Sorcery Act by the Australian Colonial administration, have not succeeded in eradicating this harmful traditional practice. The government of Papua New Guinea lacks the political will to make witch-hunts a thing of the past on the Island. The government needs to uphold the rule of law, provide protection and support to accused persons and bring witch hunters to justice.

There is an urgent need for a campaign to stop witch-hunts in Papua New Guinea and help bring to an end this wave of violence ravaging the country. Witch hunting starts in the mind and any efforts to stamp it out will target the mindset of the people.

The notion of witchcraft evokes fear and panic in those who firmly believe in the magical cause of problems and misfortune. Any alleged witch is often perceived as wicked and evil — as one who should be treated without mercy or compassion.

Public education and enlightenment is needed to change the mentality of the people of Papua New Guinea and get them to abandon the beliefs that drive them to commit these atrocious and savage crimes. To this end we have contacted a number of NGOs in Papua New Guinea, including the Business and Professional Women's Association, ChildFund Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Council of Women, Family Health & Rural Improvement Program, and Family Voice Inc., in order to explore ways of pursuing this important campaign.

I hope that critically minded individuals and groups in the country will come forward and volunteer to execute this important task. Skeptics and critical thinkers and all people of reason in Papua New Guinea need to rise up to the challenge of bringing end to witchcraft related murders and other superstition-based abuses. Skeptics and critical thinkers in other parts of the world should support this initiative to ignite the flame of reason and scientific thinking in the country.

Leo Igwe is a skeptical activist in Nigeria and a former representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. Currently, he is researching African witchcraft accusations at the University of Bayreuth in Germany. He is partnering with

the JREF to respond in a more organized and grassroots way to the growing superstitious beliefs about witchcraft throughout the continent of Africa.