

West Papua's Plight

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The author writes on behalf of TAPOL, a small British-based organisation which works to promote human rights, peace and democracy in Indonesia. TAPOL means political prisoner in Indonesian. The organisation was founded in 1973 by Carmel Budiardjo, herself a former political prisoner in Indonesia and Amnesty International prisoner of conscience.

It is now more than ten years since the downfall of the autocrat Suharto when Indonesia was transformed from an authoritarian state into a country enjoying the trappings of democracy. But in the eastern provinces of Papua and West Papua, democracy is still a distant dream. The Papuan people are still mired in poverty, with malnutrition widespread among the children, and health and education facilities that fall far short of conditions in the rest of the country.

In 1969, when West Papua was still a single province, it was incorporated into Indonesia by virtue of a fraudulent Act of Free Choice which was neither free nor was there any choice.

Tribal chiefs representing just over one thousand people, acting under duress from the Indonesian military, voted unanimously in favour of incorporation into Indonesia. The UN shamefully 'took note' of this and West Papua was henceforth removed from the agenda of its decolonisation commission.

West Papua is richly endowed with natural resources which have attracted foreign investors like bees round a honey pot. They rake in huge profits while the Papuan people have never benefited from what is rightfully theirs.

From the very start, a US multinational was waiting in the wings. In a deal arranged personally by Suharto, the US mining giant, Freeport-McMoran, won a contract of work to exploit Papua's huge reserves of copper and gold in the central highlands. Villagers living in the mountainous area were required to leave their homes to make way for the concessionaire. They were forced to

resettle in coastal regions, which resulted in a root-and-branch transformation in their way of life with grave consequences for their health and wellbeing.

Freeport has for many years been Indonesia's largest tax-payer, also paying dividends and other remittances to the central government. Just to give an idea of how profitable Freeport is, in the first quarter of 2010, it was able to double its dividend after recording a twenty-fold jump in profits.

According to the company's chief executive, Richard Adkerson, Freeport's operating cash flow totalled \$1.8 billion, and he estimated that it would exceed \$6 billion for the year 2010. Revenue for the company worldwide surged to \$4.36 billion from \$2.60 billion. He said that first quarter results reflected improved pricing as well as lower mining costs. The company's average realised price for copper was \$3.42 a pound, as compared with \$1.72 a year earlier, while the price of gold was 20 per cent higher.

In 2008, BP, a mainly British company, secured a deal to extract Papua's natural gas and began operations in Tangguh in 2009. The gas is extracted offshore in Bintuni Bay, causing disruption to fishing activities in the area. Papuans living along the north and south coast of the bay have been moved away, to make way for labour recruited from outside to work for Tangguh/BP.

These two foreign-owned extraction companies have led the way in a significant new influx of newcomers into West Papua.

West Papua has for many years felt the impact of major demographic transformation as a result of the transmigration programme launched back in the 1960s when Suharto was still in charge. Jayapura, the capital of West Papua, is now virtually an Indonesian city, with Indonesians dominating commercial activities and occupying many key posts in the provincial and local administrations. Visitors to Jayapura have been struck to see how Papuans traders, mostly women, only function on the fringes of the markets, selling their wares while seated on the ground in the open air, under the blazing sun.

Marginalisation of the Papuans

In the four decades since West Papua became a province of Indonesia, the indigenous people have gradually been overwhelmed by outsiders who now account for almost half the population, a trend that is set to continue as more and more projects are introduced. The biggest threat, at present, is a programme to convert large swathes of Papuan land into food producing

estates, in the interest of securing food sufficiency for the country as a whole, with little regard for the rights of the indigenous Papuans who inhabit the land, and the preservation of their lifestyles, traditional culture and pursuits such as hunting and fishing that have, for centuries, catered to their basic needs.

The Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate – MIFEE – will cover 1.6 million hectares of land in the south-eastern corner of West Papua. Plots of land will be tilled by private companies, including some foreign companies, to grow food, using labour brought in from other parts of Indonesia. Estimates of the number of labourers likely to be employed to till the MIFEE plots vary hugely, ranging from just under 1 million to as many as 4 million.

The number of labourers will inevitably be augmented by wives and children, as this is not seasonal work and will result in the labourers settling in the area for years, if not for good. Some Papuan activists believe that MIFEE is only the first of several food-growing estates to be introduced over the coming years in West Papua.

There are dozens of Papuan political prisoners who are serving long sentences simply for unfurling their own flag, the Morning Star, at peaceful demonstrations in many parts of the territory. According to information from local non-governmental organisations, there are no fewer than 38 political prisoners, one of whom was given a sentence of 15 years for flying a flag. Another, who has just been released and who was arrested in 2004, also for peacefully flying a flag, was sentenced to ten years. The law granted Papuans a much greater say over the running of their economy and the use of money earned from the territory's highly profitable natural resources, as well as certain political rights that were previously denied, such as the right to set up their own political parties. One aim of the law was, undoubtedly, that, besides improving conditions for the Papuan people, it would hopefully persuade them to abandon their aspirations for independence, which had been denied them as a result of the fraudulent 1969 Act of Free Choice.

Over the years, however, special autonomy has brought about no meaningful improvements for the Papuan people; virtually all the stipulations in the special autonomy law have simply been ignored. For instance, the law provides for the creation of an all-Papuan assembly, known as the MRP, which must be consulted regarding government actions on social and cultural issues affecting the Papuan people. But when it was decided to split the province into two provinces, West Papua and Papua, no such consultation occurred. This decision resulted in the

creation of new districts and sub-districts, and led to the influx of more Indonesian administrators. It has also led to the creation of new local military commands at every local administration, spreading troops more widely than ever.

In the past few months, the MRP has adopted a number of crucially important decisions, the most important being to ‘hand back’ the special autonomy law as a symbolic gesture of its rejection of the law. It also adopted eleven recommendations, including calling for a referendum on the issue of independence, for the demilitarisation of the territory, and for the Freeport to be closed down. Holding a referendum, which is a huge challenge to Jakarta, would mean restoring to the Papuan people the right to have a genuine act of free choice that was denied them so brutally in 1969.

Over the forty years of Indonesian occupation, the Papuan people have shown enormous restraint. Armed struggle has long since been abandoned in favour of what reverberates at every demonstration or meeting – for a Land of Peace in Papua. This is a call that must be heard round the world.

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