

The Land of Papua

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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. She was recently awarded the title 'Eldest daughter of the Papua nation' by the Democracy Forum Bersatu Rakyat Papua.

If ever you read anything about Indonesia being one of the world's largest and greatest democracies, you should take it with a pinch of salt. Yes, the head of government is elected every five years, and yes, indeed, there are dozens of political parties vying with each other for seats in the national or provincial assemblies. But as long as West Papua, its largest province, remains under Indonesian rule, a veritable colony, claims about Indonesian democracy are simply false.

As reported in a previous article (see *Spokesman 110*), West Papua became an Indonesian province following a so-called 'act of free choice' which took place in August 1969, when a small group of Papuans were bludgeoned into choosing integration with Indonesia. There was nothing 'free' about the choice; nor was there any choice. There was a massive military presence in the vast territory at the time, and none of those who were told 'to choose' would have dared to say 'No!'

The Land of Papua, as Papuans proudly call their homeland, has been a huge financial bonanza for the Indonesian state because of the revenue it earns from the world's largest copper and gold mine, operated by Freeport, a US corporation, which had for long been the foremost taxpayer to the Indonesian state.

Taking advantage of Papua's huge reserves of natural resources, the British company, BP, began operations last year to exploit natural gas in its Tangguh project, located round Bintuni Bay. At this stage, information about the profits it is making are not yet available, but whatever they are, the Papuans who have been removed from

their homes round the bay, which was an important fishery, are unlikely to experience any benefits, and were not even consulted about this vast British investment.

West Papua is one of the few places in Indonesia where scores of people are arrested and sentenced simply for taking part in peaceful demonstrations. The exact number of *tapols* – political prisoners – is not known, but is probably fifty or more and is changing all the time. According to a report published earlier this year by KontraS-Papua, one of Indonesia's leading human rights organisations, during the course of 2010, seven Papuans in Jayapura were charged with subversion – *makar* – all of whom were sentenced to more than two years imprisonment, simply for having taken part in peaceful demonstrations and raising the Papuan Morning Star flag.

Many others were in police custody, awaiting similar charges, while in Manokwari, in the central highlands, seven Papuans were awaiting trial for subversion. According to KontraS-Papua, 'altogether 32 people had been charged with subversion or were undergoing police interrogation on similar charges. And in February 2011, two more were arrested in Nabire.'

Makar, for which the maximum sentence is life, was incorporated into the Indonesian criminal code under Dutch colonialism. These days it is used to incriminate peaceful demonstrators and flag-raisers in Papua and, occasionally, in Maluku. A coalition of Indonesian human rights organizations is now calling for a judicial review of *makar*, in the hope of getting it repealed.

The most recent additions to the Papuan prisoners are five nurses who work at the general hospital in Jayapura. The nurses were part of a group of hospital personnel who had been promised special allowances from the beginning of 2010. More than a year later, with no allowances having been paid despite repeated reminders, dozens of hospital personnel went on strike, all in sympathy, while making sure that services at the hospital would not suffer. The five nurses were detained by the police, and now face the charge of 'incitement', which could put them behind bars for up to twelve months. This is in violation of International Labour Organization Convention 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise, which Indonesia ratified in June 1998.

In May 2010, two Papuans were subjected to fifteen minutes of torture by a group of Indonesian soldiers. This was by no means an unusual event, but the brutality was recorded on video and subsequently circulated round the world on YouTube, compelling Jakarta to respond. Three soldiers were put on trial before a military court, even though they had committed

human rights abuses and should have been charged before a human rights court. Charged with nothing more than insubordination, they were sentenced to eight or ten months for the grave crime of torture, a travesty that led to worldwide condemnation.

In 2001, West Papua was granted special autonomy, which included a number of regulations on political and social affairs that were allegedly intended to deal with Papuan grievances and quell the Papuan people's desire for self-determination. But the new status has not changed anything.

As a result, there has been a significant increase in military personnel, with more non-Papuans taking charge of the newly created local administrations. These days, demonstrations occur almost daily, denouncing special autonomy and demanding that it be 'handed back' to Jakarta.

Over the years, the composition of the population in the two provinces has gradually changed as more non-Papuans arrive to take up permanent residence. In some Papuan cities such as the capital, Jayapura, outsiders are already in the majority. They not only occupy most of the influential positions in the administration but have also taken charge of the economy. They have opened shops and businesses and dominate the markets, while Papuans have to eke out a living on the fringes of the markets, offering their wares sitting on the ground along the roadside.

Papuan women play a prominent role in the purchase and sale of local products, but there are frequently reports about *mama-mama* having to shift from one place to another because of the inadequacy of the space allotted to them. Needless to say, it is not easy for Papuan families to make a living in competition with highly motivated and well organised Indonesian businessmen and women, who continue to arrive in West Papua from overcrowded places in Java and elsewhere. The influx of Indonesians has occurred as a direct result of the state policy of transmigration, which began during the late 1960s when General Suharto was in power, and has continued without respite. It is estimated that within a year or two, Papuans will be outnumbered by the newcomers.

In March 2011, Papuan church leaders published a *Theological Declaration of the Churches in Papua* which strongly condemned transmigration and the frequent military operations against Papuans. The church leaders describe these two processes as a form of genocide, aimed at eventually 'annihilating indigenous Papuans'. In the words of the Declaration,

'Transmigration policy and the unrelenting military operations are, in our view, well-planned programs to eventually annihilate indigenous Papuans. Papuans are positioned as "the other" and as such warrant surveillance, control and civilisation. Papuans are not equal citizens of Indonesia.'

In 2001, Papuans held a Grand Assembly at which they decided overwhelmingly to pursue only peaceful means in their struggle for basic rights and adopted the slogan, *Papua, Land of Peace*. In pursuance of this policy, Papuan organisations right across the political and social spectrum have been calling for dialogue with Indonesia. One of its foremost advocates is Pastor Neles Tebay, who has travelled the length and breath of West Papua to hold consultations with tribal groups and church leaders about the need for dialogue. According to Tebay, dialogue is a means of finding solutions to the problems besetting the Papuan people. The aim would be for the two sides to discuss the problems and agree to the best solution.

According to most Papuan leaders, this dialogue should be mediated by a neutral, third party, similar to the consultations held between Jakarta and the people of Aceh which led to a Memorandum of Understanding in 2005. On that occasion, a former Finnish president assumed the role of mediator. Peace was restored to Aceh, ending more than fifteen years of government abuses carried out by the security forces during which some 15,000 Acehnese died.

However, the Indonesian government refuses to pursue a similar policy for West Papua. On the contrary, the government has responded to calls for a dialogue with a bland suggestion for ‘constructive communications’ with Papua. While on a visit to Australia in March 2011, the country’s vice president, Boediono, frankly declared that Indonesia rejects bilateral dialogue. He referred, instead, to a new agency set up in Jakarta ‘to promote development’ in West Papua. He also spoke about ‘more openness’ in Papua, but offered no assurances that the government would allow greater access for foreign journalists and non-governmental organisations to visit Papua.

Boediono’s ‘agency’ falls far short of meeting Papuan demands to address the outstanding issue of widespread human rights violations in Papua, nor has it put an end to the scourge of impunity for perpetrators from both the military and the police who have committed abuses ever since West Papua was integrated into Indonesia more than forty years ago.

In September 2010, a sub-committee of the US Congress for the first time held a hearing on the situation in West Papua, which was addressed by Papuans, US academics and representatives of human rights organisations, including Amnesty International. In a further sign of growing support in the US, a seminar was held at Yale University in April 2011, at which a number of academics submitted papers on the situation in West Papua.

However, when the Melanesian Spearhead Group held its annual session this April in Fiji, Papuans were not invited to attend even as observers, although an Indonesian delegation was invited to attend. This reflects the influence exercised within the group by the Australian government whose policy is guided by Canberra's determination to maintain cordial relations with Jakarta.

These developments reveal that, while support for West Papua is growing in the US, much still needs to be done to win support for the Papuan people elsewhere in the world.

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