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West Papua: Colonisation is alive and well

In 1962, after reaching

a deal in secret with the Netherlands, Indonesia occupied the former Dutch colony of West Papua and then assumed temporary control in 1963 pending a vote by the inhabitants. That same year, an armed resistance movement *Organisasi Papua Merdeka* (OPM: Free Papua Movement) emerged and has been fighting with Indonesian forces ever since.

Papua is a region rich in natural resources but is plagued by decades of separatist violence. Papua's abundant natural resources have made it another focus of the 'resource curse' – the curse of being resource rich. Significant natural resources often give rise to power struggles to control them and Papua is no exception. The Grasberg mine operated by Freeport McMoRan and the Indonesian Government is the largest above ground copper mine in the world and has generated more than half of Papua's GDP in the ten years to 2005. But there is a protracted conflict in the area bounded by the mine, Timika and Tembagapura¹. There have been ongoing disturbances around Timika as well as corruption and human rights abuses². While the Indonesian Government constantly accuses the OPM of this violence, there is evidence that suggests that some at

least is a result of struggles between police forces and the Indonesian Army which is determined to hang on to its dominating power in Papua after having lost both Timor Leste and Aceh³.

Imparsial, the Indonesian human rights monitor maintains that violence in Papua often targets human rights activists, whom the Indonesian military presume to be members of separatist groups⁴. It is alleged that the military is using agents to weed out critical voices in the press and sending in more battalions to protect vital natural-resource facilities. Although torture of radical students and separatist sympathisers by security forces was no longer in practice, there were 'still rights violations, arbitrary arrests and detention of Papuans voicing their opinions, especially the young.'⁵ The lessons learnt by the conflict resolution in Aceh has not taught the government that a military approach will only incite more violence and be the source of further human rights abuses⁶.

In 2009, East Timor celebrated a decade of independence from Indonesia's 24 year violent occupation. But West Papuans remembered and mourned four decades since an Indonesian sponsored event called the 'Act of Free Choice' (popularly called 'Act of No Choice') where 1025 or 1045 (sources vary) Melanesian men, hand-picked by the Indonesian military as representatives of the rest of the almost 1 million Papuan inhabitants



'voted' for integration with Indonesia. The UN General Assembly subsequently recognised the event as being agreed to by both Indonesia and the Netherlands and thus lent some form of legitimacy to it⁷. Then, in 2001, Indonesia passed a 'Special Autonomy' law supposedly to ensure that more of the income from resource exploitation would go to Papuan development. It also promised an independent dialogue with Jakarta and a popular referendum on its future political status. However, at the same time it stepped up its fight against the OPM. It currently maintains about 20,000 troops in the region.

In June 2010, the advisory Papuan People's Assembly (MRP) called on the Regional Parliament to support the 'Special Autonomy' law. Though an unprecedented number of Papuans (up to 20,000) rallied to show support for this resolution by marching 17 kilometres from the MRP base to the parliamentary buildings in Jayapura⁸, many Papuans do not support special autonomy. Special autonomy has not delivered wellbeing

The Freeport mine is
an open wound
on the body of my
People.

Benny Wemba

nor empowerment. Papuans were promised a fairer share of the wealth from their resources but living standards have continued to fall: Papua ranks bottom among other Indonesian provinces in the Human Development Index⁹. More than half of its 4 million people live in poverty. One of the reasons is that Jakarta persists with a policy of high levels of migration of Indonesians (*trasmigrasi*) into the region. Since occupation, over 750,000 have immigrated to the extent of making the Papuans a minority in the entire region by the end of 2010¹⁰. Increasing levels of administration run by Indonesians are absorbing ever increasing amounts of the income generated by the resource exploitation. Another reason for lowered living standards is the epidemic levels of HIV/AIDS, greater than any other province of Indonesia. Researchers from Sydney University's Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies argue that Indonesian army officers are profiteering from legal and illegal brothels, with inadequate health testing regimes fomenting the rapid spread of the disease¹¹.

In 2004, Jakarta passed a law requiring the Indonesian Army to divest itself of all commercial interests in Papua but there has been little progress. According to Sydney University's Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies half the military budget or less had traditionally come from government coffers and the Army officers would have to produce the rest and so it would seem that much of the intimidation was being driven by them to make their business interests pay sufficiently to meet the bill.

It has been suggested that the fighting in Aceh which ended with the Helsinki Agreement in 2005 might be reproduced in Papua. Aceh has remained an integral part of Indonesia and obtained some exclusive political and economic privileges not available to other provinces: having local political parties and entitlement to significant

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benefits gained from the exploitation of their natural resources. However, many Papuans look to East Timor and, like them, want nothing less than complete independence.

West Papua's Melanesian neighbours have consistently supported independence. In July 2010, Vanuatu's Parliament passed a unanimous resolution committing itself to concrete and practical measures to promote freedom for West Papua by raising the issue at the Pacific Islands Forum and calling on the UN General Assembly to ask the International Court of Justice to arbitrate on the legitimacy of West Papua's incorporation into Indonesia^{xii}.

Conclusion

Countries such as Australia and New Zealand use the approach of 'quiet diplomacy' which amounts 'to polite and ineffective representations on human rights'. Australia and New Zealand are also complicit in providing military training to many of the officers who have breached human rights in Papua. They continue to be complicit in resource exploitation.

Dialogue is necessary to resolve Papua's perennial issues ranging from human rights violations, massive environmental destruction and rapid transmigration to a dysfunctional special autonomy. It is essential for effective governance in the region.

Papua is a tragedy at our doorstep. Australia and New Zealand should work together in partnership with Vanuatu, and other Pacific Island Forum nations

to implement the Papuan calls for peaceful dialogue with the Indonesian government by international mediation.

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