

John Otto Ondawame

WORKING FOR WEST PAPUA'S INDEPENDENCE

Dr John Ondawame is a leading West Papuan academic, activist and member of the West Papua Presidium Council. He was recently awarded a PhD in political science by the Australian National University. His thesis titled *One People, One Soul: West Papuan Nationalism and the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM)/Free Papua Movement*, calls for peaceful dialogue between Indonesia and people of West Papua. In an interview with Prabha Gulati, John Ondawame gave a history of his involvement in the West Papuan struggle for independence. He is currently coordinator of the West Papua Project at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Sydney.

John Ondawame is from the Amungme tribe in the southern highlands of West Papua. He went to the University of Cenderawasih, in Jayapura, where he studied economics in the early 1970's. As a student organiser, his activism was stimulated by his experiences at university and further strengthened after returning to Akimuga, the village of his youth, near the mining town of Tembagapura.

While at university, Ondawame became increasingly aware of differences in the way that indigenous Papuans were treated by the Indonesian authorities, in comparison with the mainly Javanese migrants. The Indonesian system of university entry requires students to pay fees at both state and private institutions. Very few Papuans were able to afford these and as a result very few were evident on campus. The government provided scholarships, but it was obvious to Ondawame that these were mainly given to recent arrivals from other islands.

He joined the underground student movement, which was supportive of OPM's activities in the jungle. Ondawame stated that he was unable to tolerate the injustices that he saw and his activism eventu-

ally led to his arrest. After a year in prison, he managed to return to his village on the pretext of his grandmother's death. What he noticed was an enormous change in the indigenous Papuans' status within the community and standard of living. It was as if an "apartheid system" had been created.

Mining had begun in Freeport in 1967, despite local objections, with the establishment of the world's largest open-pit gold mine, owned and operated by the US multinational, Freeport McMoRan Copper and Gold Inc. Land was taken away from the local tribal owners and trees were cut down without any compensation from the government. If compensation was asked for the indigenous people were labeled as 'thugs' or seen as OPM guerilla fighters and treated as terrorists.

Papuans were no longer able to enter land that had belonged to them. They were barred from entering the local supermarkets and were displaced. Not only was their traditional means of providing sustenance for themselves and their families taken away, they were offered few job opportunities through the mining conglomerate. Expatriates including Australians, Phillipinos, Koreans,

Malaysians and US nationals were brought into Freeport.

Sacred places were destroyed during the initial exploration of the area and in the establishment of the mine. The forests of 'Nemang Kawi' the highest mountain in the south Pacific and traditionally a sacred site, were cut down without permission or compensation. Witnessing these changes in his homeland made Ondawame decide that he had to fight "not only to gain independence, but to gain regain the respect and dignity of the people".

He worked to organise resistance in his home region and to recruit for the OPM. He later fought with the OPM in the Papua New Guinea border area and organised political and military campaigns. In September 1978, he was arrested again, in Vanimo, PNG - with his colleague Jacob Prai, a leader of the OPM movement - and imprisoned in Port Moresby. He was about to be deported to Indonesia when UNHCR intervened. The following year, he was accepted as a refugee by the Swedish government, along with Jacob Prai. Ondawame lived in Sweden, until 1993 when he came to Australia for doctoral studies.

Since the downfall of the Soe-



Photo: Peter Williamson

harto regime, the OPM has played an important role in mobilising the people of West Papua. The shift towards democratisation, has given the OPM an opportunity to encourage nationalistic meetings, such as flag raising ceremonies, in Timika, Biak, Sorong and Jayapura.

On 26 February 1999 a delegation of 100 members representing different regions within West Papua went to Jakarta to meet President Habibie. Their purpose was to call for national dialogue on the future of West Papua. There was little positive response from Jakarta; they were dismissed, treated as if unimportant, and not worthy of respect. Twelve months later the same delegation came together and a decision was made that a national congress was needed to decide West Papuan aspirations. As a result of the second national congress which was held in June 2000, a new popular representative body, the Papua Presidium Council was formed and called for a re-examination of the 1969 'Act of Free Choice' and to bring the people of state and government who betrayed the West Papuans to

justice.

Ondawame believes that although the principles espoused by the Wahid government were in language more democratic, "in practice, violence and military approaches were still dominant". Ondawame sees West Papuans as political victims for the sake of stability of the region, both in 1969 when the so-called Act of Free Choice ballot took place and again in this current time. "I believe in people's power and I believe that they can bring the Indonesian government to the negotiating table. But international support is needed, pressure from regional powers such as the South Pacific Forum, countries such as the US, Australia, and those countries that provide aid to Indonesia, such as Japan, the European Union ... aid agencies such as the World bank, the IMF and the Asian Development Bank also need to be lobbied."

Ondawame believes that Jakarta is paying only lip service to the autonomy proposals. There has been a regional government and parliament set up through Indonesian govern-

ment auspices - "servants of Jakarta" - but the majority of West Papuans are not interested in special autonomous status. The West Papuan Presidium will call for a referendum of the people if Jakarta continues to reject proposals for complete independence, which are being drafted by a West Papuan collaboration between Cenderawasih University and the regional government.

Ondawame is currently working at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Sydney as coordinator of the West Papua Project. The aim of the project is to promote a dialogue for peace in West Papua and promote strategies for the nonviolent resolution of conflict. The intention is to raise public awareness of the human rights implications of the conflict in West Papua and to promote conflict resolution as a viable alternative to the current escalating conflict. He is also International Spokesperson for the OPM.

Strategies consist of strengthening networks, addressing the information deficit on West Papua through research and a public awareness campaign, and promoting education on conflict resolution. Since April 2000, the West Papua Project undertakings have included meetings with parliamentarians with a view to raising awareness of the project and gaining support; organising fundraising functions; and seeking funding. The Project is also liaising with West Papuan support groups, and with an Australian member of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), which is currently investigating the 1969 Act of Free Choice. The aim is to have the International Court in The Hague examine the Act with regard to its status under international law and its human rights ramifications. From there, Ondawame says it would have to go to the Decolonisation Committee of the UN, before the UN could ultimately vote to reverse its acceptance of Indonesia's annexation of West Papua.

Ondawame has his work cut out for him. ■

By Prabha Gulati

WESTPAPUA
TRANSITION