

An Invisible War: West Papua Update

For years, the international community has turned a blind eye to Indonesia's human rights violations in West Papua. However, West Papuans and solidarity activists are now asking the UN secretary-general, Kofi Annan to review the UN's role in transferring West Papua from the Dutch to Indonesia. PRABHA GULATI reports.

Last March West Papua's leading human rights organisation, ELS-HAM presented a petition to senior UN officials in New York, requesting a review of UN's involvement in the 'Act of Free Choice' clause of 1968. The act granted West Papuans the right to decide whether they wanted to stay under Indonesia's rule or become an independent nation. ELS-HAM also presented a formal submission based on detailed research of classified records that revealed the extent to which the UN had turned a blind eye to the manipulations of the Indonesian military and the US demands that West Papua becomes Indonesia's 26th province.

Although the Indonesian invasion of West Papua (a Dutch colony) in 1961 had caused an international outcry, it occurred at the height of the cold war and the US Kennedy administration feared the Soviet bloc influence on Indonesia. So in 1962 secret negotiations, which excluded West Papuans, took place and a deal to hand over the West Papuan territory to Indonesia was brokered. The deal called for the Dutch to formally transfer the territory to an interim UN administration, which would then turn it over to Indonesia in 1963. But it was at the end of 1969 through the proviso of the 'Act of Free Choice' Clause when West Papuans could decide their right to self-determination. Unfortunately, President Sukarno refused to hold a referendum and instead hand picked 1025 Papuans who were forcibly

coerced to vote in favour of retaining Indonesian governance, resulting in a unanimous victory for Indonesia.

Thus the 'Act of Free Choice' clause would become, according to Papuans, the 'Act of no Choice', and West Papua became a Cold War sacrifice, enabling the US to have Indonesia as an important ally in the region.

With the Dutch gone from West Papua, Indonesia became the new colonial power. The new administration restricted movement between towns, encouraged transmigration, banned political meetings and jailed those who opposed it. A wave of repression swept across West Papua that would continue unabated for years, resulting in instability and violent conflict that has left more than 100,000 indigenous Papuans dead.

This is a conflict rarely reported in the media. Overshadowed by the international attention given to events in East Timor, it never had the prominence it deserved in the international community. But theirs has been a 40 year long struggle, led by the pro independent Papua Council Presidium (PDP), which apart from holding talks with armed separatist groups such as the Free Papua Movement (OPM), has been attempting to hold a dialogue with the Indonesian government for some time, with no success. As PDP's Chairman Theys Hiyo Eluay, said before he was murdered last November, "we offered the hand of friendship to Jakarta, but they have brushed it aside...We

have offered dialogue, and they have answered with violence."

West Papua, the western half of the world's second largest island, is hot and humid, with more than 70 per cent of its area covered with dense tropical rainforest. The majority of the island is mountainous, with scenic coastal beaches, extensive and inaccessible swamp and mangrove forests in the south, and powerful rivers carving gorges through the central highlands. Snow capped mountains form the backbone of the island, dividing it into northern and southern regions. The rugged terrain of the island caused tribal groups to become isolated, resulting in more than 250 sub-groups with differences in languages, customs and artistic expression. West Papua is home to two million dark-skinned Melanesian people, a race quite distinct in culture

and tradition from the largely Muslim Malay people in the rest of Indonesia.

In her speech on the eve of Indonesia's independence day, President Megawati Sukarnoputri said: "We apologise to our brothers who have long suffered as a result of inappropriate national policies...We need to pay more attention to human rights." She further urged the people of Papua to "help build a new Indonesia" and abandon their struggle for independence.

However, it is evident from reports from human rights and church groups within Indonesia that crimes continue to be perpetrated under Megawati and that the separatist conflict in Papua has in fact worsened. Amnesty International in its annual 2001 Report on the region, stated that hundreds of cases of extra-judicial execution, disappearances, torture and unlawful arrests were reported. In one case, four independence activists from Papua had been convicted and sentenced to three months imprisonment for spreading hatred against the government for their role in a peaceful demonstration. These students were subjected to torture and ill treatment and were denied medical treatment in detention for injuries sustained.

Amnesty goes on to document that deaths and injuries resulted from excessive force used by the military and police against protesters, particularly in areas of religious and ethnic conflict. The police and military, the report said, have also been responsible for

destroying villages. Armed Papuan independence groups in the province have also been responsible for recent violence, directed against non-Papuan migrants and settlers.

"Not much has changed under Megawati" says John Otto Ondawame, a leading West Papuan academic and activist. "She has simply continued the oppressive policies of other military regimes in the region. Megawati is not a political thinker but a puppet of the military," Ondawame says.

Under Megawati 20,000 Indonesian soldiers have been posted to West Papua to provide extra support in strategic areas, particularly at the border between Papua New Guinea and West Papua, in mining operating areas and in Jayapura, the capital.

According to Ondawame secret operations against leaders of human rights organisations and pro independence movements have continued. "The recent killing of the Presidium's leader Theys Hiyo Eluay indicates that the Indonesian government is not serious in its quest for peace through dialogue," he says.

On the other hand, the transmigration policy has again been implemented in order to quell Papuan nationalism. According to the international press, the Indonesian army began funding a massive influx of young male migrants from Java and Sulawesi into West Papua. If the influx of migrants continues Papuans will become a minority. Of serious

concern, is the possibility that these young men may provide a ready-made militia in the event of social unrest. Over the last 12 months, there have been reports that Laskar Jihad, a militant Muslim group blamed for fueling several sectarian conflicts within Indonesia, has increased its presence in West Papua, a predominantly Christian province. "There are at least 3,000 Laskar Jihad activists," Ondawame says, "they are armed with weapons and linked to Al Qaeda."

Megawati has made it quite clear that she won't allow any political groups that will undermine the integrity of Indonesia. "They want to use military muscles in order to crush any opposition" Ondawame adds.

It is evident that neither repression nor the lack of international support will lessen Papuan desire for independence. The independent movement in West Papua will live – and so will the violence, unless there are measures that address the human rights abuses that contribute to the political impasse. Pressure must be exerted on Indonesia to enter into a meaningful dialogue with Papuans and the onus is on the international community.

"All we demand is a peaceful, rather than a military solution," Ondawame says. "In fact the military, should be brought to the international Court of Justice. It is time Megawati thinks carefully about reconciliation." ■

