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Violence in West Papua: the vulnerable become Indonesia's latest target

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Violence in West Papua: the vulnerable become Indonesia's latest target

Abstract

Why has West Papua's non-violent student movement the West Papuan National Committee (KNPB) become the latest target of a campaign of terror in West Papua?

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Indonesian activists protest against the Indonesian government's violence in West Papua. EPA/Bagus Indahon

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Why has West Papua's non-violent student movement the West Papuan National Committee (KNPB) become the latest target of a campaign of terror in West Papua?

Calls for a referendum

Since Indonesia's 1963 takeover of West Papua from the Dutch, the occupation has been characterised by oppression and violence.

Indonesia's unwillingness to allow West Papua a chance to choose its political future stems largely from the revenue it pulls in from the US-owned gold and copper mine in West Papua, Freeport McMoRan.

In passing months, the KNPB has organised protests across West Papua that call for an independence referendum. This has placed unbearable pressure on Indonesia. The protests have also raised awareness of the abuses committed by Indonesian security forces against indigenous Papuans, as noted at the May 2010 United Nations Periodic Review.

Indonesia's human rights record has also elicited criticism from Germany. This criticism was the precursor to a month of shocking violence in West Papua. Perhaps this is why KNPB has been the focus of the Indonesian security apparatus' latest attack on indigenous West Papuans.

Assassination, violence, and protest

The broad daylight assassination of KNPB deputy chairperson Mako Tabuni on June 14 by police, has enraged the indigenous resistance movement triggering a backlash of riots and fresh violence in West Papua's largest town, Jayapura.

Police claim Mako was armed with a police rifle and resisted arrest. Eyewitnesses to the murder disagree, saying Mako was standing at a kiosk eating betel nut when several cars pulled up and shot him on the spot.

A week before the assassination, Buchtar Tabuni, the chairperson of the KNPB, was arrested for organising student demonstrations in West Papua. Police claim they pursued and killed Mako because of confessions from an incarcerated Buchtar that Mako had been responsible for several murders earlier that month, including of other KNPB members.

Mako had actually been campaigning for an independent investigation into the killings. The spokesperson of an Indonesian NGO for victims of violence, Kontras Papua, said that the Papuan police had spun myriad lies in the aftermath of Mako's assassination.

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The police allegation was categorically denied by KNPB spokesperson, Victor Yeimo, whom I spoke to several days ago. Yeimo attested to Mako's commitment to non-violence and queried why KNPB would be shooting its own members.

Police and the Indonesian security forces have illogically pinned the murder of KNPB members and others on the Papuan indigenous resistance movement, and a police wanted list is circulating with more KNPB names listed.

On 23-4 June, five KNPB members were allegedly detained by **Densus 88** (Indonesia's Australian-trained counter-terrorism unit) forces, and families of the five are worried as they have not been seen since.

In the week following Germany's denunciation of Indonesia's treatment of West Papuans at the UN Universal Periodic Review, a **German tourist was shot** in Jayapura by an indigenous-looking gunman police claim may have been Mako Tabuni.

In a handy turn of events for police the tourist's wife was unable to identify Tabuni due to his murder, and the legal system is saved from subjecting him to due process. The shooting may well have been executed by another indigenous Papuan. The use of ethnic Papuans to carry out Indonesian military dirty-work is a well known occurrence. The timing of Germany's criticism and the shooting of the German tourist is unnerving.

Military violence has also spread to West Papua's highland town, **Wamena**. When two soldiers **hit a child whilst speeding**, the local community retaliated by killing one of the soldiers. Hundreds of soldiers from the local battalion came back later for revenge, running amok by setting fires, shooting into crowds and vandalising houses.

Over the past month the shooting spree in West Papua has claimed at least 18 lives. This is partly the work of trained killers, with snipers targeting vital organs.

The leaders of the two largest churches in West Papua, **Benny Giay** and **Socratez Sofyan Yoman**, assert that the mysterious killings are politically motivated and have left indigenous Papuans in fear of leaving their homes. **Human Rights Watch** also reports that the government continues to overlook the need to investigate the violence, barring monitors and journalists from entering Papua to investigate.

Justice and Australia's role

It seems unlikely that those to blame will be brought to justice, as Indonesian President **Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono** has made light of the soldiers' rampage by labeling it "**inappropriate action**". He has called the shootings in Papua "**small-scale**" in comparison to those taking place in the Middle East.

Where is this leader's compassion for his people? Or are Papuans' deaths so insignificant that they only merit attention when statistically matched to those in other global tragedies?

The recent shootings in Papua are, sadly, nothing new for West Papuans, although the frequency of lethality and the accompanying power of the Papuan backlash by way of protest are increasing.

As Indonesian security forces fan the flames of West Papuans' independence aspirations, Australia must end its assistance to them.

By **training Indonesia's counter-terrorism forces** accused of carrying out much of the current violence in Papua, Australia is more of an accomplice to Indonesian crimes than it was via its wilful ignorance during the lead up to the intervention in East Timor.

It will be an embarrassment to Australia, but a blessing to West Papuans if, because of the violence

that Australian expertise helps finesse, Australia is forced to intervene to prevent genocide in West Papua in the near future.

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