

Extracted from the paper delivered by **Sophie Grig** of Survival International

PAPUA, LAND AND LIFE

WHEN the Dutch handed over their East Indies colony to Indonesia in 1950 they did not include West Papua. They intended, instead, to prepare the territory of 2.2 million mainly Melanesian people for independence.

The Papuans, who have no ethnic or geographical connection with the rest of Indonesia, began to choose a name (Papua), a flag and a system of leadership.

But Indonesia insisted that the Dutch must hand over their former colony in its entirety - and threatened to take it by force with support from the Soviet Union.

Under pressure from the US which was fearful of an Indonesian-Soviet alliance, the Dutch agreed in 1962 to a deal brokered by the United Nations, in which the UN would administer 'West New Guinea' in preparation for a referendum.

In this referendum, the "Act of Free Choice", the Papuans were supposed to vote either for independence or to become part of Indonesia. In 1963, the UN handed the territory to the Indonesians, who renamed it Irian Barat, meaning 'West Hot Place'.

Six years later, the Act of Free Choice' finally took place. It is commonly known in Papua as the 'Act Free of Choice', as only 1,025 handpicked Papuans were allowed to vote, some literally with guns at their heads. Unsurprisingly, they voted unanimously to become part of Indonesia. Papua's tribal peoples were deeply unhappy at the Indonesian takeover of their land. The Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM - the Free Papua Movement) was formed, and the armed independence movement is still active.

The biggest threat to the peoples of Papua is the Indonesian military which has a long and shocking history of human rights violations, including murder, rape, massacres and torture.

Amongst all the terrible abuse of all the terrible abuse of tribal people in the modern world, Indonesia's treatment of the Papuans stands out as the worst for its sheer scale and ferocity.

'Operation Annihilation', begun in 1977, was a violent attack against the peoples of the central highlands. The military bombed villages from planes; tribal leaders thought to be sympathetic to the OPM were dropped out of helicopters over villages as an 'example'. The rivers were full of bodies, and almost every family in the highlands lost someone to the violence. Many families were wiped out completely.

Today the military operates more subtly, and the army bans all outsiders, including Papuans, from many areas where it is operating. What information it is

possible to get suggests that the abuse, although not matching the appalling scale of the late 1970s, is still horrendous.

In one incident in July 1998, a large group of independence supporters gathered peacefully around the banned Papuan flag on the island of Biak when the army and police opened fire. Survivors were taken prisoner. Eyewitnesses who escaped reported that Papuans were loaded on to navy ships and taken out to sea where they were shot and then thrown overboard. No one knows how many died. Only eight deaths have been confirmed and three people officially reported missing, but soon afterwards 32 bodies, many badly mutilated and some with their hands tied together, were washed up on the Biak shore.

In total, an estimated 100,000 Papuans have been killed by the Indonesian armed forces since 1963. A recent paper by Yale Law school concluded that the evidence 'strongly suggests that the Indonesian government has committed proscribed acts with the intent to destroy the West Papuans...in violation of the 1948 Convention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.'

Exploitation of their natural resources is another major problem for the peoples of Papua.

The Grasberg mine in the south-central highlands, said to be the largest copper and gold mine in the world, has had a devastating impact on both the highland Amungme, whose land it occupies, and the lowland Kamoro, who suffer from the effects of the mine's waste. Neither tribe has had their rights recognised or received proper compensation.

The Amungme see the mountains as sacred, and where the souls of men go when they die. This is why the destruction of the mountains by the mining company has been so painful to them

The arrival of the mining company in 1967 has forced many of them to move to coastal areas, where they were never meant to live. Their land and forests are also under pressure from the many outsiders who have moved into the area for jobs. The Kamoro have also been relocated because of the pollution, which has flooded their rivers and killed not only the fish, but also the sago trees which are their main source of food.

The mine is seen as a 'vital project' by the government of Indonesia, which provides soldiers to protect it. As a consequence, the area around the mine is now one of the most militarised areas in Indonesia.

Logging is also a serious threat. West Papua has 34 million hectares of tropical rainforest, and over half of it is divided into logging concessions mostly held by Indonesian companies with close links to the military.

The big new threat to the peoples of Papua is the pro-Indonesia militia. A number of different militia groups have been formed in West Papua, all supported and in some cases armed, by the military. This was a tactic used by the Indonesian military to devastating effect in East Timor.

Human rights defenders are also being targeted. In September last year, the respected human rights organisation, ELSHAM had their Jakarta offices

ransacked by thugs and since then two senior staff have had to flee the country because of death threats.

Elsham has built up a network amongst the different tribes in Papua to report on attacks by the military or militia, and also to support the victims.

In past months, the Papuans have become increasingly concerned about the military crackdown, and this has led to different tribes coming together to try to find a peaceful solution.

Now tribal elders, human rights organisations, church groups, rebel leaders and even the police and navy are working together in support of a peaceful solution to Papua's problems - an initiative they call 'the zone of peace'.

New Zealand and Vanuatu have become more active over Papua. New Zealand has offered to act as a mediator for a dialogue between the Indonesian government and Papuan community leaders, and the Vanuatu government has called for a review by the UN Secretary General of the UN's role in the transfer of Papua from Dutch to Indonesian control.

Survival International has been campaigning for the rights of the peoples of West Papua for almost 25 years. The organisation succeeded in getting the World Bank to pull out of the racist transmigration scheme – some 800,000 outsiders have settled in Papua - and the mining companies are more cautious in their dealings with the tribal peoples' land. But the Indonesian army is unlikely to bow to international pressure.

Survival International, however, has pledged to continue to campaign for the lives, land and human rights of the people of Papua.

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