

Indonesia's 1969 Takeover of West Papua Not by "Free Choice"

Document Release Marks 35th Anniversary of Controversial Vote and Annexation

Secret Files Show U.S. Support for Indonesia,
Human Rights Abuses by Indonesian Military

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Washington, D.C. - July 8, 2004 - "You should tell [Suharto] that we understand the problems they face in West Irian," national security adviser Henry Kissinger wrote President Nixon on the eve of Nixon's July 1969 visit to Indonesia. On the 35th anniversary of West Papua's so-called "Act of Free Choice" and Indonesia's first direct presidential elections, the National Security Archive posted [recently declassified documents](#) on U.S. policy deliberations leading to Indonesia's controversial 1969 annexation of the territory. The documents detail United States support for Indonesia's heavy-handed takeover of West Papua despite overwhelming Papuan opposition and United Nations requirements for genuine self-determination.

Background

When Indonesia gained its independence from the Netherlands in 1949, the Dutch government retained control over the territory of West New Guinea. From 1949 until 1961 the Indonesian government sought to "recover" West New Guinea (later known as West Irian or West Papua), arguing that the territory, a part of the former Netherlands East Indies, rightfully belonged with Indonesia.

In late 1961, after repeated and unsuccessful attempts to secure its goals through the United Nations, Indonesia's President Sukarno declared a military mobilization and threatened to invade West New Guinea and annex it by force. The Kennedy administration, fearing that U.S. opposition to Indonesian demands might push the country toward Communism, sponsored talks between the Netherlands and Indonesia in the spring of 1962. Negotiations took place under the shadow of ongoing Indonesian military incursions into West New Guinea and the threat of an Indonesian invasion.

The U.S.-sponsored talks led to the August 1962 New York Agreement, which awarded Indonesia control of West New Guinea (which it promptly renamed West Irian) after a brief transitional period overseen by the UN. ([Note 1](#)) The agreement obligated Jakarta to conduct an election on self-determination with UN assistance no later than 1969. Once in control, however, Indonesia quickly moved to repress political dissent by groups demanding outright independence for the territory.

U.S. officials understood at the outset that Indonesia would never allow West Irian to

become independent and that it was unlikely to ever allow a meaningful act of self-determination to take place. The Johnson and Nixon administrations were equally reluctant to challenge Indonesian control over West Irian, especially after the conservative anti-Communist regime of General Suharto took over in 1966 following an abortive coup attempt which led to the slaughter of an estimated 500,000 alleged Communists. Suharto quickly moved to liberalize the Indonesian economy and open it to the West, passing a new foreign investment law in late 1967. The first company to take advantage of the law was the American mining company Freeport Sulphur, which gained concessions to vast tracts of land in West Irian containing gold and copper reserves.

[\(Note 2\)](#)

Over six weeks from July to August 1969, U.N. officials conducted the so-called "Act of Free Choice." Under the articles of the New York Agreement (Article 18) all adult Papuans had the right to participate in an act of self-determination to be carried out in accordance with international practice. Instead, Indonesian authorities selected 1022 West Papuans to vote publicly and unanimously in favor of integration with Indonesia.

Despite significant evidence that Indonesia had failed to meet its international obligations, in November 1969 the United Nations "took note" of the "Act of Free Choice" and its results, thereby lending support of the world body to Indonesia's annexation.

Thirty-five years later, as Indonesia holds its first-ever direct Presidential elections, the international community has come to question the validity of Jakarta's takeover of West Papua and the ongoing human rights abuses there. In March, 88 members of the Irish Parliament urged United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan to review the United Nations' role in the 1969 Act of Free Choice, joining South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu and scores of non-governmental organizations and European Parliamentarians. On June 28, 2004, nineteen U.S. Senators sent a letter to Annan urging the appointment of a Special Representative to Indonesia to monitor the human rights situation in West Papua and the territory of Aceh.

The Documents

The Archive's postings include a [confidential February 1968 cable](#) from U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia Marshall Green. Following a conversation with Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik about the situation in West Irian, Green concluded that conditions in the territory are "far from satisfactory and deteriorating." A [subsequent cable](#) reported that Indonesia is "belatedly and almost desperately seeking to develop support among the peoples of West Irian" for the "Act of Free Choice."

A [consular trip to West Irian](#) in early 1968 observed that "the Indonesian government directs its main efforts" in the territory to "maintaining existing political facilities and suppressing political dissent." Because of neglect, corruption and repression at the hands of Indonesian authorities, Western observers agreed almost unanimously that "Indonesia could not win an open election" and that the vast majority of West Irian's inhabitants favored independence.

In July of 1968 the UN-appointed Ambassador Fernando Ortiz Sanz arrived in Jakarta as

the Secretary General's Special Representative for assisting Indonesia with the West Irian plebiscite, as called for by the 1962 New York Agreement.

A [confidential cable from the U.S. Embassy](#) to the State Department outlined the stakes in the upcoming "Act of Free Choice." While cautioning that the U.S. government "should not become directly involved in this issue," Ambassador Green worried that Ortiz Sanz or other UN members might "hold out for free and direct elections" in West Irian, frustrating Indonesia's intention to retain the territory at all costs. Consequently, U.S. and other Western officials [worried about the need to meet](#) with Ortiz Sanz to "make him aware of political realities." In a [confidential October 1968 Airgram](#) the U.S. Embassy reported with relief that Ortiz now "concedes that it would be inconceivable from the point of view of the interest of the U.N., as well as the GOI, that a result other than the continuance of West Irian within Indonesian sovereignty should emerge."

The Indonesian government firmly rejected the possibility of a one-person, one-vote plebiscite in West Irian, insisting instead on a series of local 'consultations' with just over 1,000 hand selected tribal leaders (out of an estimated population of 800,000), conducted in July 1969 with between 6,000-10,000 Indonesian troops spread throughout the territory. As the U.S. Embassy put it in a [July 1969 telegram](#):

The Act of Free Choice (AFC) in West Irian is unfolding like a Greek tragedy, the conclusion preordained. The main protagonist, the GOI, cannot and will not permit any resolution other than the continued inclusion of West Irian in Indonesia. Dissident activity is likely to increase but the Indonesian armed forces will be able to contain and, if necessary, suppress it.

Ambassador Frank Galbraith [noted on July 9, 1969](#) that past abuses had stimulated intense anti-Indonesian and pro-independence sentiment at all levels of Irian society, suggesting that "possibly 85 to 90%" of the population "are in sympathy with the Free Papua cause." Moreover, Galbraith observed, recent Indonesian military operations, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds, possibly thousands of civilians, "had stimulated fears and rumours of intended genocide among the Irianese."

President Nixon and national security adviser Henry Kissinger visited Jakarta in July 1969 while the "Act of Free Choice" was underway. Improving relations with Indonesia's authoritarian regime was clearly uppermost in the mind of Kissinger, who characterized Suharto as a "moderate military man ... committed to progress and reform." In Nixon's secret briefing papers ([Document 9](#) and [Document 10](#)) for the visit Kissinger flatly told the President "you should not raise this issue" of West Irian and argued "we should avoid any U.S. identification with that act." The White House generally held to this position throughout the period preceding and following the "Act of Free Choice."

Although they recognized the deep flaws in the Act and in Indonesia's intentions, U.S. officials were not interested in creating any problems for a Suharto regime they saw as nonaligned but pro-Washington. While the U.S. was unwilling to actively intervene on Indonesia's behalf (an action they thought unnecessary and counterproductive) at the UN to insure quick General Assembly acceptance of Indonesia's formal takeover of West Papua, the U.S. quietly signaled that it was uninterested in a lengthy debate over an issue

it viewed as a foregone conclusion and marginal to U.S. interests. In a [secret briefing memo](#) for a meeting with Indonesia's Ambassador to the United States Soedjakmoto, a State Department official expressed confidence that international criticism of the "Act of Free Choice" would quickly fade, allowing the Nixon Administration to move forward with its plans for forging closer military and economic ties with the authoritarian regime in Jakarta.

Documents

NOTE: The documents featured below were selected for inclusion in this Electronic Briefing Book. [Click here to download the complete set of documents on this issue \(PDF - 7.6 MB\)](#).

[Document 1](#)

February 29, 1968

Subject: West Irian

U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Confidential Telegram

The U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia, Marshall Green reports on a conversation with Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik on West Irian. Malik suggests the possibility of reducing the more than 10,000 Indonesian troops serving in Irian. He also hints Indonesia will insist on indirect means for ascertaining the wishes of the inhabitants of the territory in 1969, perhaps relying on tribal leaders who can be induced with "favors for them and their tribes." Green expresses concern about the "deteriorating" situation.

[Document 2](#)

May 2, 1968

Subject: West Irian

U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Confidential Telegram

U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia Marshall Green, reports on a conversation with Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik in which Malik outlines some of the measures Jakarta is undertaking in an attempt to build support among the people of West Irian for merger with Indonesia.

[Document 3](#)

May 10, 1968

Subject: Consular Trip to West Irian

U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Confidential Airgram

In January, 1968 Embassy Political Consul Thomas Reynders visits West Irian for one month. Reynders observes the relatively low level of economic development in the territory since Indonesia assumed control in 1962, noting that "The Indonesian government's presence in West Irian is expressed primarily in the form of the Army." Reynders concludes, as have nearly all Western observers, that "Indonesia will not accept Independence for West Irian and will not permit a plebiscite that would reach such an outcome" and notes the "antipathy or outright hatred believed to be harbored toward Indonesia and Indonesians by West Irians in the relatively developed and sophisticated areas."

[Document 4](#)

August 20, 1968

Subject: The Stakes in West Irian's "Act of Free Choice"

U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Confidential Telegram

US Ambassador Marshall Green suggests "Act of Free Choice" in West Irian "May well be the most important political issue in Indonesia during the coming year." Notes Indonesian "dilemma" in seeking "to devise some meaningful way to conduct ascertainment which will not involve real risks of loss of West Irian." Green reminds the State Department, in urging a hands-off approach by the U.S., that "we are dealing here essentially with stone age, illiterate tribal groups" and that "free elections among groups such as this would be more of a farce than any rigged mechanism Indonesia could devise."

[Document 5](#)

August 4, 1968

Subject: "Act of Free Choice" in West Irian

U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Confidential Telegram

Marshall Green writes to Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific G. McMurtry Godley expressing concern over the views of U.N. Special Representative for West Irian Ortiz Sanz. Green recommends that "in view of high stakes ... we should do anything we can indirectly to make him aware of political realities" regarding Indonesian intentions toward West Irian.

[Document 6](#)

October 4, 1968

Subject: West Irian

U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Confidential Airgram

Embassy Political Consul Jack Lydman describes the results of Ortiz Sanz's recent orientation visit to West Irian and asserts that Sanz is now "attempting to devise a formula for an "act of free choice" in West Irian which will result in an affirmation of Indonesian sovereignty" yet "stand the test of international opinion."

[Document 7](#)

June 9, 1969

Subject: Assessment of Irian situation

U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Confidential Telegram

On the eve of the "Act of Free Choice," the U.S. embassy offers a highly critical appraisal of Indonesia's determination to insure West Irian's integration, concluding that from Jakarta's standpoint "separation is unthinkable." After detailing Indonesian efforts to repress "increasingly desperate" supporters of independence for West Irian, Embassy concludes with concern for "future Indonesian relations with Irianese," many of whom display a "festering antagonism and distrust of Indonesians."

[Document 8](#)

June 9, 1969

Subject: West Irian: The Nature of the Opposition

U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, Confidential Airgram

Galbraith offers a detailed assessment of the views of various Irian groups opposed to integration with Indonesia and advocating independence, including the Free Papua Movement (OPM). He observes that "opposition to the GOI stems from economic deprivation over the years, military repression and capriciousness, and maladministration," and suggests that anti-Indonesian groups will be unable to alter the final outcome of the "Act of Free Choice."

Documents [9](#) and [10](#)

June 10 and July 18, 1969

Subject: Djakarta Visit: Your Meetings with President Suharto
Henry Kissinger, Memorandum for the President

National security adviser Henry Kissinger briefs President Nixon on his visit to Indonesia and likely conversations with Indonesian President Suharto. Kissinger argues that there is no U.S. interest in getting involved in the issue of West Irian and that it is certain its people will choose integration with Indonesia. In Nixon's talking points, Kissinger urges that the President refrain from raising the issue except to note U.S. sympathy with Indonesia's concerns.

[Document 11](#)

August 25, 1969

Subject: Call by Indonesian Ambassador Soedjakmoto
U.S. State Department, Secret Memorandum

Paul Gardner briefs Assistant Secretary of State Marshall Green on his visit with Indonesian Ambassador to the U.S. Soedjakmoto, who is expected to ask for help from the U.S. in "preparing smooth U.N. handling" of the "Act of Free Choice" in the General Assembly.

Notes

1. For an excellent overview of the events leading up to the New York Agreement, see Jones, Matthew. *Conflict and Confrontation in Southeast Asia, 1961-1965: Britain, the United States, Indonesia and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2002): 31-62; C.L.M. Penders. *The West New Guinea Debacle: Dutch Colonization and Indonesia, 1945-1962* (Hawaii, 2002); John Saltford. *The United Nations and the Indonesian Takeover of West Papua, 1962-1969* (Routledge, 2003).
2. Denise Leith. *The Politics of Power: Freeport in Suharto's Indonesia* (Hawaii, 2003).