

Marking another milestone in the post-Suharto shakeup of Indonesia, 2,700 West Papuans declared their sovereignty as a nation at a congress in early June. (Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid committed to changing the region's name to Papua, which is preferred by the territory's indigenous population; Jakarta previously called it Irian Jaya.) Reiterating a 1961 declaration of independence from the Dutch, the congress asserted that West Papua has been denied the right to self-determination. The impressive array of representatives from across the region was inspired by East Timor's referendum; unlike East Timor, West Papua's inherently undemocratic incorporation into Indonesia was sanctioned by the UN.



Wellem Manimwarba (37) was shot in March by riot police in Nabire, West Papua. The woman at top

Papua New Guinea, which has a different colonial history and is now independent, lies on West Papua's eastern border. Together, the two regions make up New Guinea, the second largest non-continental island in the world. West Papua is home to more than 300 tribes with different customs and histories. When Indonesia won its independence from the Dutch shortly after WWII, West Papua remained part of the Netherlands, though Indonesia continued to claim the territory.

In 1961 the Kennedy administration actively backed Indonesia's position, sending Attorney General Robert Kennedy to pressure the Dutch to relinquish the mineral-rich half-island. The result was a UN-brokered "New York Agreement," which transferred West Papua to Indonesian sovereignty, with an interim UN administration from October 1962 to May 1963. The agreement allowed for West Papuans to decide on their political future by the end of 1969, but a 1962 report from the Council on Foreign Relations noted, "No one regarded the stipulations for 'free

choice' by the Papuans as more than a formality."

Indonesian troops arrested and tortured Papuans throughout the transitional period. A Papuan observer said UN representatives "had no contact with the people whatsoever."

After President Sukarno pulled Indonesia out of the UN and stated that a referendum was unnecessary because "the whole people of West Irian are in favor of the Indonesian Republic," West Papuan resistance intensified. The Indonesian military responded with counter-insurgency operations and crackdowns on nonviolent dissent; the first Jakarta-appointed governor of the province was arrested for distributing "subversive" literature and held without trial for 22 months.

After Suharto seized control of Indonesia in late 1965, repression in West Papua escalated. Indonesian military strafing runs, rocket attacks and naval shelling wiped out entire villages. One report estimates that 3,500 villagers had been killed by the end of 1967.

Suharto's military government rejoined the UN and restored plans to hold a "referendum" in 1969. Ortiz Sanz, a Bolivian diplomat appointed by the UN to observe that process, received complaints from native Papuans of military intimidation, but Sanz reported that "only a very insignificant percentage of the population is capable or has interest in any political actions or even thoughts." Instead of holding a truly representative vote, the authorities implemented a "collective consultation" of 1,025 hand-picked representatives. One of them later testified that Brigadier-General Ali Murtopo threatened to shoot and tear out the tongues of anyone voting for independence. There was not one dissenting vote, but Sanz concluded that an "act of free choice" had taken place "in accordance with Indonesian practice," and the UN General Assembly passed a resolution "taking note" of the result, effectively an endorsement. As a British diplomat wrote in 1968, "even if there are protests about the way they go through the motions of consultation, no other power is likely to conceive it as being in their interests to intervene. . . . I cannot imagine the U.S., Japanese, Dutch or Australian governments putting at risk their economic and political relations with Indonesia on a matter of principle involving a relatively small number of very primitive people."

In the following years the Suharto regime oversaw the transmigration of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians from Java and other islands to the territory importing the racism typified by General Sarwo Edhie, a military commander in the late 1960s who said the West Papuans were "lazy and half were naked," and "[they] badly need civilizing".

The Mining Connection

The U.S.-based mining company Freeport McMoRan, one of the first corporate partners of the Suharto regime, has made a fortune from Indonesian military dominance of West Papua. Inside the territory, Freeport is the majority owner of the world's largest gold mine and second largest copper mine. Its Grasberg gold mine processes more than 220,000 tons of ore daily, of which 210,000 tons of waste ore, or tailings, are discarded into nearby rivers, wreaking havoc on the ecosystem that sustains the local population.

Under Suharto, Freeport had a free hand in the region. It has long used Indonesian troops as security forces, whose abuse of the local population spurred widespread support for the Free Papua Movement (OPM), the decentralized armed resistance. The Indonesian government's own human rights commission confirmed that Papuan dissidents have been detained and tortured in Freeport shipping containers. But, largely due to pressure from Indonesian and Papuan activist groups, the company is facing increasing criticism from Jakarta. Indonesia's Minister of the Environment recently announced plans to revoke Freeport's permit to dump tailings, saying, "it is quite clear that the company does not recycle its waste before throwing it into the [local] rivers." Freeport, the largest single taxpayer in Indonesia, has also been implicated in bribing Suharto- and Habibie-era Indonesian officials.

It is unclear how far the company will be pushed. Freeport Director Henry Kissinger serves as a volunteer political and economic affairs advisor to Wahid, and U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia Robert Gelbard has attacked Freeport critics, asserting that renegotiation of the company's contract would adversely affect foreign investment in Indonesia.

Military Crackdowns Looming?

In June, members of the House of Representatives warned President Clinton of "escalating activities in Papua of pro-Indonesia militia groups, similar to those that operated in East Timor, many of whom are linked to the Indonesian Armed Forces." The TNI is also using more subtle forms of its time-honored divide and conquer strategy: the Sydney Morning Herald reported that Yorris Raweyai, a leader of Pemuda Pancasila, a group of criminal street thugs who carried out violent attacks and incited riots for Suharto, has provided funds to buy influence with elements of the pro-independence movement.

For years military and police slaughtered unarmed civilians at West Papuan resistance flag-raising. Some have been allowed to go forward under Wahid's presidency, but on July 28 police killed two Papuans hoisting the independence flag. Tolerance for self-determination is clearly not on the agenda: six Papuan congress organizers are being prosecuted for treason and two thousand mobile brigade police (Brimob) arrived in the territory in early July. Last February and March Brimob opened fire on West Papuan activists in the town of Nabire, where human rights monitors say "news of torture whilst in detention continues to be normal."

Supporters of human rights should not wait for further bloodshed before demanding an international reexamination of the "Act of Free Choice", respect for Papuan calls for independence, and an end to Indonesian military, police and militia operations in West Papua. Given U.S. backing for the illegitimate annexation of what Jakarta calls its 27th province, it would only be fair if public education and campaigning could also help realize the following demand of the June congress: "the United Nations, the United States of America and the Netherlands should review their involvement in the process by which Indonesia annexed West Papua and should honestly, justly and truthfully convey the findings to the Papuan people on 1 December 2000."

ETAN maintains a listserv about West Papua; you can find out more about it at www.topica.com/lists/WestPapua

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