

The new year dawned ominously for Papuans, as a new military campaign in the remote Punjak Jaya region in central West Papua reportedly displaced thousands of civilians who fled to nearby mountains and jungles.

Meanwhile, in the capital, Jayapura, Indonesian government security forces injured two Papuan pastors while forcefully seizing the Synod headquarters of the second largest Christian church in West Papua. The central government in Jakarta is supporting an effort to block Papuan pastors from breaking away from an all-Indonesia Church grouping. Prejudicial involvement by Jakarta political and security officials in the church dispute was foreshadowed in statements by senior Indonesian security officials earlier in 2006 who alleged, without evidence, Papuan church support for the region's small armed pro-independence elements. Papuan church officials have forcefully denied the claim, noting that all religious leaders in West Papua have been pressing for nonviolent solutions to West Papua's many problems, especially the lack of health, education and other basic services, and for the area's demilitarization.

The new year has also brought efforts to form yet another province within West Papua, without the consent of Papuan civil society. The previous Jakarta initiative transpired despite Indonesian Supreme Court disapproval. Both efforts have been engineered by a cabal of Jakarta interests working through Papuan individuals. Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch noted in a January report that Papuan human rights defenders "still suffer threats and intimidation from security forces when monitoring and investigating human rights abuses."

While all of these developments raise grave concerns among human rights advocates in West Papua and abroad, the new military campaign in the Punjak Jaya region and the growing pressure on the Papuan church are particularly alarming.

Indonesian military (TNI) operations beginning in Fall 2004 and extending into early 2006 entailed destruction of villages and the forced flight of thousands of residents into the jungles to escape marauding Indonesian soldiers. In the forests, absent medical care, shelter or access to gardens and other food sources, scores of Papuans died. The military's tight restrictions on access to the besieged civilian population by humanitarian workers exacerbated the crisis. During such military campaigns, already tight restrictions on access to West Papua by journalists, human rights monitors or humanitarian assistance providers are even more severe. Such restrictions afford the security forces carte blanche to violate fundamental human rights norms and even Indonesian law.

The new TNI campaign raises prospects of similar abuses against Papuan civilians. Developments leading up to the current crisis remain somewhat unclear. Earlier in December, the Indonesian military reported two Indonesian soldiers were killed while searching for an armed resistance element of the OPM (Free Papua Movement) that had briefly taken over the town of Mulia. The OPM group withdrew from Mulia when it appeared the TNI would attack the town. The OPM action was unexpected, as the OPM has for several years generally observed a truce in support of political efforts by civic leaders to end military repression and attain self-determination.

Human rights sources have reported that the TNI commander for the Nabire region was in Mulia in late December. These sources also report the presence of military and police forces in the region, including TNI Battalion 753 from Nabire, Kopassus (notorious special forces troops), Brimob (Police Mobile Brigade), and intelligence units. Human rights defenders in West Papua also report that the military buildup has generated tensions in the region.

Escalating pressure on the Kingmi church (Gareja Kingmi), while not presenting the immediate, dire consequences for the welfare of Papuans posed by military operations in the Puncak Jaya region, nonetheless constitutes a fundamental threat to human rights and the safety of church leaders. From 1962 to 1983 the Kingmi Church (established by American missionaries from the Christian and Missionary Alliance) operated independently in West Papua. In 1983 Kingmi Church joined with the Gereja Kemah Injil Indonesia (The Tabernacle Bible Church of Indonesia). That step was necessary to assure that Indonesian authorities would permit visas for foreign missionaries applying to live in West Papua.

Pastor Benny Giay, Chair of Kingmi Church's Bureau of Peace and Justice, notes that in 2006, "when foreign missionaries stopped coming to West Papua we decided that there was no reason to continue to remain under the control of Jakarta. In our congress this year we withdrew our membership from the Gereja Kemah Injil Indonesia and reinstated the Kingmi Church's former status as an independent Synod in West Papua. Jakarta opposes this and accuses us of being separatists."

Following severe intimidation targeting Papuan human rights advocates in 2006, it is clear that international concern for and support of human rights in West Papua, especially in the face of abuses carried out by an unaccountable and unreformed Indonesian military and police, will be essential in 2007.

Ed McWilliams is a former political counsellor with the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta. He works with ETAN and the West Papua Advocacy Team.

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Generating Tension