

INTERNATIONAL Lawyers for West Papua (ILWP), a global network of legal practitioners dedicated to promoting respect for the rule of law in that country, brought the campaign to Guyana last week.

Speaking, last Friday at Cara Lodge, in Quamina Street, Georgetown, Co-Chair of ILWP, Ms. Melinda Janki said their quest could have been taken anywhere else in the world but the West Papuan people selected this country.

“Because, 40 years ago, Guyana was one of a tiny number of countries that voted in support of West Papua’s freedom and its right to self-determination,” she explained.

West Papua is the western half of New Guinea, the world’s second largest island and Janki said the population has been denied one of the fundamental rights in the United Nations (UN) International Charter of Human Rights, self- determination, the right to choose their own government and national status.

She said ILWP is determined to help the indigenous peoples of West Papua freely and peacefully exercise their fundamental rights and freedom as guaranteed by international law and human rights standards, including the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Paramount among these rights is the collective legal right of indigenous Papuans to self-determination which was violated in the ‘Act of Free Choice’ in 1969, Janki said.

She said: “West Papua is on the island of New Guinea. There is a line down the middle of that island and, on the eastern side, is Papua New Guinea and, on the western side, is West Papua. The same Papuan people live on both sides of that line.”

Janki said Papua New Guinea is a free and independent sovereign state but West Papua is an

occupied territory annexed in 1969 by Indonesia.

According to her: “In 1969, at the time of the annexation, the Papuan people had a right to self-determination, a right which is guaranteed by the UN Charter. The issue went before the UN General Assembly. The West Papuan people had no voice in the General Assembly and they could not claim their right to freedom.”

Janki said powerful states in the General Assembly voted for Indonesia to have West Papua. However, a small group of states objected and asked the General Assembly to follow international law.

“They asked the General Assembly to give the West Papuans people the right to exercise self-determination and give them their chance for freedom. Guyana was one of those states,” she revealed.

Annexation “Today, West Papua is still a colony. The annexation was a terrible violation of West Papua’s right to self-determination. The ILWP is working to redress that wrong,” Janki declared.

She said one of the UN purposes is to develop friendly relations, based on the principles of equal rights and self-determination of peoples.

“Peace is the basis of the International Legal Order. The UN was established to maintain international peace and security. The ILWP is committed to helping the indigenous people’s of West Papua to exercise freely and peacefully their right to self-determination,” Janki reiterated.

Towards that objective, the ILWP is working closely with the International Parliamentarians for West Papua, which was formed 2008, at the House of Commons in London, England.

“These are parliamentarians from around the world who support West Papua’s right to self-determination. The ILWP has members from all over the world and we invite all lawyers

who believe in the rule of law and justice to join,” Janki said.

She said one of the most important things the ILWP is doing and intends to continue is educate people about West Papua’s right to self-determination that was confirmed in the UN Declaration.

Janki observed that, while many former ones are no longer colonies, West Papua still does not have freedom.

She said other important aspects of ILWP work, is the protection of rights and freedoms and to advocate for people to be able to exercise their rights freely and peacefully.

Leader of the West Papuan Independence Movement in the United Kingdom (UK) and Chairman of Demmak, the Koteka Tribal Assembly, Mr. Benny Wenda, who was imprisoned and tortured in Indonesia and accepted as a refugee in the UK, acknowledged that ILWP is very important for his people in West Papua, where there are more than 250 tribes.

He said the country is very rich in gold, copper, timber, minerals and gas and the Guyana visit marks the start of putting West Papua’s case internationally.

“Our voice has never been recognised. So, through this, ILWP could help support West Papuan people,” Wenda said.

He said his people have been crying for freedom more than 46 years and he is carrying their burden around the world seeking help.

Wenda lamented that his people are being killed, tortured and raped and lands, mountains and forests destroyed and one of his legs was broken when his village was bombed by Indonesian military.

“Now I have a crutch with me all the time,” he lamented.

Chairman of the Guyana National Toshias Council, Mr. Colin Andrews assured of his people’s support to West Papua.

He said: “Today, I recognise that, even with the struggles that we have here as indigenous people, they are the ones who are struggling more.”

“In this country, as indigenous people, we have had a fair share of neglect, too, but what we did and I think all our people are proud to make strong representation, so that we can be where we are today and I can proudly say that we are climbing the ladder,” Andrews said.

Encouraging Wenda to continue his advocacy, he said: “There should be no turning back...we are going to be supporting your cause.”