

Jayapura. Papua Police Chief Insp. Gen. Bagus Ekodanto said on Tuesday that suspected separatists had occupied an airport in the isolated village of Kasepo, Mambramo Raya, some 300 kilometers from the provincial capital Jayapura.

Ekodanto said his office had dispatched three groups of police personnel from the Detachment 88 anti-terror squad to the area to ascertain what was happening.

The rebels have reportedly taken over the landing strip, erecting a tent that could shelter up to 20 people, though the group's size could not immediately be determined. Papua Police efforts to reach the facility have been hampered by rugged terrain.

Ekodanto said the Detachment 88 officers were travelling by river, accompanied by local tribal leaders, prominent figures, local administration officers and religious leaders.

He said communication during the operation had also been difficult. "We can only use [single side band] radio, and but even then the connection has been erratic," said Ekodanto.

Papua Police spokesman Adj. Chief Comr. Nurhabri said the operation had been hampered by geographic obstacles and poor infrastructure. The area is only accessible by air or by speedboat.

Police also discussed on Tuesday a plan to bring in an Air Force helicopter today, but no decision had been made as of press time last night.

Nurhabri said the group had taken control of the strip on Sunday and raised flags, but police had not yet determined whether those occupying the airfield were members of a Papuan separatist group or simply local residents demonstrating other grievances. Mambramo Raya is a new district established in March 2007. The territory joined the previously separate districts of Sarmi and Waropen.