

INDONESIAN special forces soldiers based in the Papuan town of Merauke regularly abduct Papuans from the streets and their homes and beat people indiscriminately, a report from Human Rights Watch says.

According to the testimony to researchers from the New York-based organisation, indigenous Papuans have been beaten with fists, boots, pipes and hoses, and forced to eat mouthfuls of raw, hot chillies in a series of brutal acts that took place between August 2007 and May this year.

The alleged abuses prompted Human Rights Watch to urge Australia and other Western countries to cease training with Kopassus, as the Indonesian special forces unit is known, until it "holds accountable" those responsible for the incidents in the report, and other abuses in the past.

Papua has been the subject of a long-running separatist campaign by indigenous people. It has a heavy military and police presence; journalists require approval to travel there and must report under strict conditions.

But the victims documented in the report are not separatists, simply ordinary citizens targeted by the troops from Kopassus.

"Antonius", a 21-year-old quoted in the report, told of being picked up by five Kopassus officers after they broke up a street party in September.

He said he was taken back to the Kopassus barracks, handcuffed to a chair and beaten by a procession of 12 officers who entered the room. The beating went on "from night until morning", the report says.

"They beat me on my face repeatedly. My face was bleeding. My eyes were swollen. Once one soldier held my chest and another one kicked my stomach," Antonius said.

Although he was vomiting blood, the soldiers stuffed 10 raw chillies in his mouth, he told Human Rights Watch.

The bizarre punishment with chillies was meted out to others cited in the report. Indigenous Papuans often chew betel nut, leading to many small cuts in the mouth and making the eating of raw chillies acutely painful.

Human Rights Watch urged Western governments to cease co-operating with Kopassus troops, which have only recently resumed joint training exercises with Australia after concerns were raised about their abuses in East Timor.

A spokesman for the military, Rear Marshal Sagoem Tambun said: "This kind of report confuses us. Who are those people who were interviewed in the report? We don't know that. Who violated the law?"