

Unease in Papua over leader's return

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People chant slogans during a rally in Jayapura of Indonesia's Papua province on Tuesday. Over a thousand people rallied in Jayapura demanding a referendum on independence from Indonesia. (Oka Barta Daud/Reuters)

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By Peter Gelling Published: March 25, 2009

JAKARTA: Tensions arising from clashes between the Indonesian military and independence fighters in the restive and resource-rich region of Papua in recent months have been further stoked by the return of the separatist movement's founder from exile.

Nicolas Jouwe, 85, arrived last week from the Netherlands at the request of the Indonesian authorities, who said they hoped to begin discussions on a possible settlement of the decades-old conflict. In a statement distributed by government officials after his arrival, Mr. Jouwe said that separatist fighters should help "rebuild Papua within the frame of the unitary republic of Indonesia," suggesting a willingness to give up his independence struggle.

But at a Friday news conference in Jakarta, Mr. Jouwe referred to Papua and Indonesia as separate nations, saying only that a dialogue should be opened. "We are close nations," he said. "We cannot live without considering each other."

The apparently contradictory statements angered independence activists, who greeted Mr. Jouwe's return to Papua on Sunday with protests against his willingness to negotiate with the government.

On Tuesday, thousands rallied in the streets of Jayapura, the capital of West Papua Province, demanding independence. Security forces there, apparently fearful of the protest reaching an international audience, detained four Dutch television journalists. They were released after 12 hours of questioning, according to local media reports.

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The government has not commented on Mr. Jouwe's statements in Jakarta.

Mr. Jouwe's return comes after several months of sporadic violence and ahead of parliamentary elections on April 9. On March 15, the police said, separatist rebels attacked a security post, killing a government soldier.

A small group of armed rebels and other independence advocates have waged a low-level separatist campaign for almost 40 years. Indonesia took over Papua, which occupies the western part of the island of New Guinea, from the Dutch in 1963 and in 1969 formalized its control over the region by a vote of 1,000 Papuan community leaders that was widely thought to be rigged.

Papua's development lags behind that of the rest of the country, despite its huge stores of natural resources. It still lacks basic public health programs and reliable electricity and water supplies.

As a concession to independence advocates, in 2001 legislators in Jakarta passed an autonomy law aimed at giving the region more local control and a greater share of mining, gas and timber revenues. Human rights groups say the law has never been fully implemented and a portion of the funds have gone missing in a web of corruption.

"The special autonomy package in many ways represented a victory for the independence movement," said Eben Kirksey, an American anthropologist and Papuan expert. "But the renewed violence of the last few months is evidence that the autonomy package is not a solution to the problem. The autonomy funds have been disappearing in a vortex - a black hole somewhere between Jakarta and Jayapura."

Muridan Widjojo, an official at the state-funded Institute of Social Sciences who has published a paper about the autonomy law, said the legislation lacked legitimacy. None of the stakeholders "politically or morally support the implementation of the law," he said.

As a result, the administration of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is increasingly considering a settlement similar to the one reached in the northern province of Aceh, which also waged a decades-long independence struggle until a peace deal was signed in 2005.

Ending the conflicts in Aceh and Papua was a central promise of Mr. Yudhoyono's election campaign in 2004. His administration's renewed efforts at peace in Papua come just before the parliamentary elections and ahead of presidential elections in July.

The invitation to Mr. Jouwe, officials said, represented an important early step in the peace process.

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"Indonesia is a very different place now since we have become a democratic country," said Rizal Mallarangeng, a spokesman for the minister of people's welfare, Aburizal Bakrie, who was Mr. Jouwe's host in Jakarta.

"We said to Jouwe: No longer will you be put in jail simply because you have a different opinion," the spokesman said. "Like in Aceh, we wanted to find a new path to solve these disagreements in a way that everyone can accept."

Indonesia, a sprawling archipelago with hundreds of ethnic groups, has a long history of independence movements. The country's late authoritarian ruler, Suharto, brutally squelched rebel groups.

But after East Timor's secession in 1999, the government has attempted more peaceful negotiations with breakaway provinces. With the peace deal in Aceh, Papua remains the country's last flash point of separatism.