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Members of the National Police's Mobile Brigade (Brimob) arrive in Wamena in Jayawijaya district, Papua, on Tuesday following the killing of at least 24 workers at a bridge construction site in Yigi district. (Antara Photo/Iwan Adisaputra)

By : Gayatri Suroyo and Agustinus Beo Da Costa | on 1:46 PM December 05, 2018

Jakarta. Security forces in Papua are hunting for members of a separatist group suspected of killing at least 24 construction workers building a bridge in a remote district, a military spokesman said on Tuesday.

Papua has suffered a simmering separatist conflict since it was incorporated into Indonesia after a widely criticized United Nations-backed referendum in 1969 and remains one of its poorest regions.

Col. Muhammad Aidi said security forces were trying to reach the scene of the alleged attack in Yigi district after a priest had said that 24 men from the construction company Istaka Karya had been "sadistically slaughtered" by an armed criminal separatist group.

"According to the report we received, it started with an armed criminal separatist group holding a ceremony to commemorate what they claim to be their independence day on Dec. 1," Aidi told Metro TV.

Aidi said one of the workers appeared to have taken a photograph, which angered the group and sparked the killings.

Some Papuans regard Dec. 1 as their independence day from Dutch colonial rule, raising a banned separatist flag and holding rallies.

Aidi said the bodies of the construction workers were believed to be near the bridge they were building.

A joint military and police team of more than 150 personnel was going in on foot after arriving in a nearby district, Papua Police spokesman Adjutant Chief Comr. Suryadi Diaz said in a statement.

He said four wounded workers fleeing the area had claimed a military post was also attacked and a soldier killed.

Suryadi said the armed group was led by Egianus Kogoya, a leader from the Free Papua Movement (OPM). The OPM could not immediately be reached for comment.

Public Works Minister Basuki Hadimuljono told a briefing construction on the bridges to connect the Trans-Papua Highway would be postponed until the area was secured.

Since coming to power in 2014, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo has pledged to hasten development and open access to the resource-rich province including through the Trans-Papua road project to link remote areas in the province.

Jokowi ordered the military on Tuesday to guard construction workers in Papua and pledged infrastructure construction in the area would continue, according to comments on the website of the office of the cabinet secretary.

While separatists have often been blamed for carrying out attacks, the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) has also urged Jokowi to end rights violations by security forces in Papua, an area where access by foreign media has often been restricted.

Reuters