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Headquarters trashed and three people charged with treason for holding a prayer meeting marking group's fifth anniversary

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[3C6JHP5KJ7Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3C6JHP5KJ7Q)|480|360|/youtube}

Indonesian forces have raided and allegedly destroyed the offices of the West Papuan liberation group, taking over one site in what lawyers for the group claim is an "illegal occupation".

The raids, which have prompted threats of legal action, as well as several arrests and three treason charges, come amid an increased crackdown on the separatist movement and continuing violence in the decades-long insurgency against Indonesia.

Three headquarters of the West Papuan National Committee (KNPB) – the domestic arm of the liberation campaign – were raided by Indonesia police and military (TNI) in recent weeks, with two destroyed and the Timika office taken over for use as a joint military-police outpost on New Year's Eve.

Why is there unrest in West Papua?

The Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua share an island with Papua New Guinea, and its indigenous population has been engaged with a low-level insurgency with Indonesia for

about half a century.

After the departure of Dutch colonisers, and disagreement between Papuans, the Netherlands, and Indonesia, the United Nations sponsored a treaty appointing Indonesia as temporary administrator. ÂÂÂÂ

In 1969 a UN resolution affirmed the so-called “Act of Free Choice”— a referendum which saw 1,026 hand-picked West Papuans vote to remain with Indonesia, but which has been repeatedly dismissed by international observers as unrepresentative and coerced.

Indonesia maintains the regions have always been Indonesian and the resolution simply affirmed its sovereignty.

A guerrilla separatist movement grew and violence has continued ever since, with claims more than half a million West Papuan people have been killed, as well as countless arrested and injured, and villages destroyed. Indonesia is regularly accused of human rights abuses, which it denies.

In recent years the West Papua cause has gained increased support from regional neighbours, including Vanuatu, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands, but a 2017 independence petition – signed by 1.8 million West Papuans and smuggled out of the country to the UN’s decolonisation committee – was rebuffed as outside its mandate.

A letter sent to Mimika police by KNPB lawyers demanded authorities withdraw from its ongoing “illegal occupation” by Tuesday or face legal action.

“We are seeing a new chapter of persecution against KNPB by unlawfully arresting them and now arbitrarily destroying their properties,” KNPB lawyer Veronica Koman said.

The letter accused officers of trespassing and of coercion in the arrests and detaining eight

activists who allegedly signed letters that they were “forever Indonesian” and promising not to take part in any further campaigns.

Among those arrested was Yanto Awerkion, who was released in April last year after spending 10 months in prison for his involvement in an independence petition.

The KNPB legal letter said the organisation had given authorities notice on 29 December, as an act of good faith, that it intended to hold a prayer event marking their fifth anniversary.



Indonesian authorities dismantling signage at a Free West Papua campaign office in Timika. Photograph: Supplied

“On 31 December 2018, the prayer and traditional cooking pit feast ‘bakar batu’ event which was planned to be held at 9am was forcibly cancelled by the arrival of more than a hundred police and military personnels,” the letter alleged.

“They failed to present letter of assignment, arrest warrant, and search warrant [and] ... police conducted destruction including vandalism.”

Mimika police chief Agung Marlianto confirmed to the Jakarta Post that about 80 security personnel took over the KNPB headquarters in Timika on New Year's Eve, removing all insignia and posters, and destroying walls.

"The headquarters is not allowed to operate any more and was taken over as a TNI and police post from now on," he said.

Eight KNPB members were also questioned on Saturday as part of treason investigations, the lawyers alleged.

On Tuesday afternoon they said three had been flown to Jayapura and charged with treason offences over the prayer event.

KNPB lawyer Veronica Koman said campaigners' freedom of assembly was guaranteed by the constitution, and claims that the organisation was illegal were incorrect in law.

"Even if KNPB was illegal, police still does not have the right or authority to destroy or vandalize their property, let alone trespassing and illegally occupying land and building owned by KNPB."

Spokesman for the Papua regional police, Suryadi Diaz, told Indonesian media the building belonged to the local government, which had given it to the local community, but KNPB had used it.

"That is why the Mimika police saw it fit to retake the building and made it into a joint post for the police and TNI," he said.

The takeover of the Timika office followed the alleged destruction of headquarters in Asmat and Jayapura in December.

In a video purported to show the Asmat site, a man films the smoking ruins of a building. "Today, Free Papua office was burnt down by police and military," he says, according to a translation obtained by Guardian Australia.

"We are full of tears, we are full of misery, but we will continue the fight. Wherever you are, please support us and be in solidarity with us, because we will continue the fight for now and forever."

Indonesian authorities launched a crackdown on West Papuan separatists last month following the killing of at least 17 construction workers in the Ndagu province of West Papua by the liberation army, which claimed the workers were all members of the Indonesian military.

The attack came just days after Indonesia arrested more than 500 people, reportedly including Indonesians, at West Papuan independence rallies across the country.

Indonesia was later accused of using white phosphorus on civilians – against international law – in a report by the Saturday Paper, a report Indonesia said was

"totally baseless, non-factual, and gravely misleading".

Following the attack on the construction workers, the exiled leader of the West Papuan independence movement, Benny Wenda called for calm on all sides. In an interview with the Guardian, Wenda said Indonesia had a history of "creating violence" and using it to justify increases to its military presence and harsh crackdowns on West Papuans.