

## **WEST PAPUA PRO-INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE SECURITY SITUATION IN INDONESIA**

*By Marie Kezel*

In West Papua and Papua, often referred to collectively as West Papua, pro-independence movements emerged in 1969. These movements have, since then waged a persistent low-level insurgency in West Papua against perceived Indonesian occupation.

There have been 3 main political movements seeking independence for West Papua; the Federal Republic of West Papua, the National Parliament of West Papua and the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation including the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM) "Free Papua Movement" and its military arm, the West Papua Army composed since 2019 of the unification of the 3 main armed separatist groups, the West Papua Revolutionary Army (WPRA), the West Papua Liberation Army (TPNPB), and, the West Papuan National Army (TNPB), (Al Jazeera 2019).

Since 2014, the political groups have united to form a single umbrella organization called the "United Liberation Movement for West Papua".

The pro-independence campaigns of the armed separatist movement OPM "Free Papua Movement" have primarily taken the form of peaceful protests and diplomacy. However, since the years 2000, the movement has resorted to guerrilla warfare actions against Indonesian authorities, terrorist acts and violent demonstrations.

The conflict which opposes part of the Papuans population and the Indonesian authorities is impacting the security situation in the country, but also the region and even deteriorating relations with Indonesia's international partners.

### **The movement's evolution**

In 1996, the "Free Papua Movement" kidnapped on January 8, 26 members of a World Wildlife Fund research mission in Mapenduma, Papua Province, in what is known as the Mapenduma hostage crisis.

The International Committee of the Red Cross acted as an intermediary between the OPM and the Indonesian authorities in this crisis. 15 hostages, all Indonesian nationals, were released relatively quickly. The 11 remaining (comprising 4 Britons, 2 Dutch, and 5 Indonesians) were kept until, after lengthy negotiations, the ICRC secured an agreement for their release on May 8.

In 2009, the Grasberg mine exploited by the American firm Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc became a target to the "Free Papua Movement". Notably, on August 12, a convoy of

16 buses carrying employees, protected by 20 police officers, was attacked. 2 people died and 5 were injured in the assault. After that, at least 600 additional Indonesian military personnel have been deployed in Indonesia's Papua province to support the police and private guards responsible for protecting the company's mining facilities.

In 2018, the Indonesia project of a 4,000-kilometers Trans-Papua Highway including a bridge triggered a new wave of violence. In December 2018, up to 30 employees from the state-owned company Istaka Karya were killed by fighters of the West Papua Liberation Army. This action is known as the Nduga massacre. The workers were building a bridge in Nduga regency when they were rounded up and later executed. In justifying the attack, the TPNPB said the construction workers were Indonesian military in disguise, not civilians (DW, 2018).

Following this incident, President Joko Widodo pledged that the infrastructure work would continue despite the violence and Indonesia's military took over the protection of the construction site of the infrastructure project in West Papua. The soldiers protecting the bridge-workers thus became priority targets for the insurgents. In 2019 several attacks have been reported. On July 20, for example, a soldier was killed on the Papua bridge construction site by gunmen acting under the orders of Egianus Kogoya, leader of the military wing of the OPM.

In January 2019, Benny Wenda, an exiled West Papuan independence leader, delivered a petition signed by more than 1.8 million people calling for an independence referendum to the United Nations Human rights chief Michelle Bachelet.

Later, in August and September 2019, the pro-independence movement, supported by the majority of the Papuan local community took the streets in several violent protests. The demonstrations broke out across West Papua on Indonesian Independence Day, after the arrest, racial abuse and tear-gassing of dozens of Papuan students, in the city of Surabaya in the province of East Java. For many days, the Papuan community clashed with the police and military personnel. The protesters set fire to a legislative council building, blocked major roads, set ablaze a prison and a marketplace, and destroyed ATMs and shops. The violence of the movement led to the deployment of more than 1,000 Indonesian security personnel to quell the unrest. In these protests, up to 40 people were killed and hundreds were injured.

Overall, due to the far-reaching restrictions on foreign journalists seeking to report on Papua and West Papua provinces, exact figures are unknown, but rough estimations put the casualties between 200,000 and 450,000 soldiers, insurgents and civilians killed since the beginning of the conflict between the pro-independence movement and the government forces.

Since 2016, in a bid to reach a further audience in its fight against the government and to raise awareness on its situation, the West Papua independence movement tried to launch an online campaign but, in response, Indonesia has waged a cyberwar against West Papuan campaigners. The websites of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP), International Parliamentarians for West Papua (IPWP), International Lawyers for West Papua (ILWP) and that of exiled West Papuan leader Benny Wenda have all come under distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack.

### **Root causes of the insurgent movement: affirmation of identity and racism**

Papua, a former Dutch colony, was put in 1962 under temporary United Nations administration for a referendum of self-determination to be held. The West Papuan conflict started in 1969 after the Indonesian military took over control of the Papua territory from the Dutch following the independence vote called the Act of Free Choice.

Indeed, despite the United Nations overseeing the referendum, the vote to stay within the archipelago was allegedly flawed as the Indonesian military is said to have handpicked about

1,000 Papuans to participate on behalf of the entire population. According to sources, military forces would have attempted to influence their vote by resorting to violence, threatening to kill them and their families if they voted the wrong way. To this day, the result of the referendum remains contested by the local population.

After Indonesia's acquisition of the territory, separatist groups like the "Free Papua Movement" were established to overthrow the governments in the Papua and West Papua provinces of Indonesia in order to secede from Indonesia. The newly-formed pro-independence movements have clashed ever since, against the Indonesian national army (TNI).

The Indonesian government gave Papua special autonomy in 2001 and in 2003 divided the region into 2 provinces, West Papua and Papua. This autonomy called *Otonomi Khusus (otsus)* partially allowed locals to organize themselves and express their demands. Despite initial optimism, this experiment has largely failed to assuage the Papuans and the problems have continued. While Papuan-based political and cultural structures have sprouted since the late 1990s — such as Dewan Presidium Papua (Papua Presidium Council), Dewan Adat Papua (Council of Customary Leaders), Majelis Rakyat Papua (Papuan People's Council) and EL-SHAM, (Institute for the Study and Advocacy of Human Rights) — these all failed to function as expected.

This failure was due to internal divisions among the Papuans and the unwillingness of Jakarta to provide greater concessions that would enable these bodies to become champions of Papuan self-determination (The Diplomat, 2019).

In addition to providing a special kind of autonomy, Indonesia also provided greater economic assistance to the provinces, hoping that it would help the 2 poorest provinces of Indonesia out of grinding poverty. In West Papua, the poverty rate is more than 20 percent compared to a national rate of 9.4 percent. However, the result was underwhelming. On average, people in Papua earn less and don't live as long. The 2 provinces lack access to basic services such as health and education. They also lack crucial infrastructure compared to much of the rest of the country. (*The Sydney Herald*, 2019). Hence, problems and conflicts keep recurring.

The much-hyped *otsus* and the failure of various concessionary reforms, especially institutional ones, have been principally responsible for the rise of violent and non-violent resistance of Indonesian rule in Papua. In February 2020, West Papuan leader Benny Wenda demanded the immediate release of all political prisoners held by Indonesia. Mr Wenda accused the Indonesian government of attempting to “wipe out the internal leadership of the people of West Papua”. He accused the Indonesian premier jailing those who “peacefully raised their voice against 57 years of Indonesian racism and colonialism” during West Papua's uprising in 2019 and now face lengthy jail sentences. “Indonesia is trying to intimidate and harass the West Papuan people into silence through military power,” he said.

He also warned that Indonesian authorities' way of treating the secessionists leaders would eat away at Indonesia's institutions, destroying any chance of it becoming a democratic and prosperous nation “if it does not let the people of West Papua go.”

The desire for autonomy is exacerbated by the anti-Papuan racism due to the important cultural differences between Indonesians and the indigenous Papuan population. According to Andreas Harsono, a researcher at Human Rights Watch (HRW) Indonesia, Papuans have long faced discrimination in Indonesia — a factor that has driven some young people to join rebel causes. “Papuans are mostly seen (by non-Papuans) to be inferior, stinky, ignorant; often called ‘monyet’ (monkey), or ‘kera’ (ape), because of their dark skin and curly hair,” he said. “The failures of the Indonesian government to address the problems will only enhance the resistance of Papuans to be Indonesians” (South China Morning Post, 2019).

## **Different modes of action and security impact of the movement**

Over the years, the "Free Papua Movement" has used different modes of actions to make their grievances heard.

For decades the OPM military arm called West Papua Liberation Army (TPNPB) has been waging an insurgency guerrilla-like warfare against the Indonesian forces. "All leaders and soldiers of the TPNPB National Command have a code of ethics in the revolutionary war. We will not fight against civilians," the insurgent group's spokesman Seby Sembom said.

The attack of December 2018 is considered as guerrilla warfare by the OPM as the movement is persuaded it was targeting soldiers in disguise sent to the construction site to spy on the Papuan community. The attack is however considered by the state as terrorism as, in reality, the casualties were mainly civilians.

The movement also resorted willingly to terrorist acts to destabilize the country. For instance, the attack against the mine companies (especially foreign ones like in 2009) had 2 goals: scare foreign investors away and influence gold or copper prices to destabilize the country's economy.

The OPM used as well hostage-taking and kidnapping strategies, of nationals and foreigners to put pressure on the government. The most relevant example remains the 1996 Mapenduma hostage crisis.

The movement, with the support of the population, also use demonstrations as a mean to oppose the government. And, the government's infrastructure development initiatives, the growing racism and the state's heavy-handed response to separatist activism have exacerbated the local anti-government sentiment.

The protests have sometimes been peaceful but recently, between August and September 2019, demonstrations turned violent.

The separatist threat remains limited in scope and capability as experts say that the group doesn't have the means to implement their terrorist strategies effectively. Also, the TPNBP's reliance on traditional weapons to supplement a shortfall of military-grade weaponry indicates that the group is unable to properly equip its fighters, let alone equip and integrate any substantial intake of recruits.

The group also faces a longstanding lack of funding. The majority of funds from diaspora sources are likely still prioritizing political pro-independence activism over insurgent groups. Although low-level extortion has targeted some mining operations in West Papua, there are no indications that the group has sought to tax the local population, on which it is reliant, at least for passive, if not rudimentary, logistical and intelligence-gathering support (IHS Markit, 2019).

However, the "Free Papua Movement"'s actions have not stayed without consequences for Indonesia. First, the violence in Papua forced many people to flee the region of Papua and West Papua. More than 20,000 people were reportedly displaced in the military operation that followed the attack in December 2018 and, according to military reports, since mid-August and as of October 2019, more than 16,000 people fled the recent violent unrests. The result has been an increase in poverty in the conflict-afflicted regions which are, however, among the richest, in terms of resources for Indonesia.

To give an example, Papua's largest gold mine, Grasberg Mine, jointly owned by the US firm Freeport McMoRan and the Indonesian government, generates \$1 billion annually for the country, which is why it has been of such importance in the conflict. Its strategic importance

as a source of wealth made it a privileged target for the OPM. The Trans Papua Highway, just like the Grasberg mine, constitutes another primary commercial target at risk. These 2 sites are symbolic of Indonesia's perceived exploitation in West Papua (IHS Markit, 2019).

The "Free Papua Movement" opposition to the national forces has also led to an escalation of violence thus, to the creation of deep insecurity in the region. This increase can be illustrated by the IHS Markit figures which recorded 14 separatist attacks in 2018 - more than the previous 4 years combined (IHS Markit, 2019). In 2019, ESISC reported 8 relevant incident regarding confrontations between the OPM and the Indonesian forces.

Against that, despite the Presidential Chief of Staff demand to the army to act professionally and proportionally, not in a spirit of revenge, the army uses harsh means to counter the insurgency. For example, the TPNPB claimed that the Indonesian military forces launched military actions in response to the Nduga massacre, including bombs dropped on TPNPB areas. Human rights groups have accused security forces of committing rights abuses during counter-insurgency operations as numerous cases of violence, extra-judicial killings, unlawful arrests, and mistreatment have been reported. The UN even urged a torture enquiry in February 2019 after the TNI used a snake on a handcuffed West Papua boy.

The violence of the state escalated to the point that international organizations are starting to consider whether the Indonesian government's conduct toward the people of West Papua constitutes genocide, as defined by the 1948 Genocide Convention (Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic Yale Law School, 2004). Indeed, today, in West Papua, the indigenous Papuans are a minority in their homeland. It is estimated that they should account for less than 15% of the population in 2030, compared to 96% in 1971 (Le Monde Diplomatique, 2015). On February 6, 2020, West Papuan leader Benny Wenda warned of genocide against his people. Mr Wenda called for urgent intervention to stop the massacre of the Papuans. As more soldiers were mobilized after the unrest, Mr Wenda accused Indonesia of turning West Papua into a "war zone."

The "Free Papua Movement" insurgency represents a security issue that adds to the other security challenges that Indonesia is currently facing, such as growing Islamic terrorism or piracy. The impact of the "Free Papua Movement" actions and the other threats on the country's security goes beyond the sole destabilization of the state. The insecurity has a wider effect on the neighboring states and global partners of Indonesia. The pressure on the economy could end up destabilizing the whole ASEAN association in which Indonesia has always played a leading role. The wealth of the country contributes to the functioning of the association, which is why, the "Free Papua Movement" could represent a growing threat to the nations of South-east Asia if it continues to attack important sources of income. Besides, the situation in West Papua can also trouble the partnerships of Indonesia with other countries. Indeed, the kidnappings and attacks on foreign workers and tourists can jeopardize its bilateral business relationships, especially in terms of investment and tourism.

The state's security situation can also become an important issue in Indonesia as being too focussed on internal problems can lead to neglecting its foreign policy altogether. At the United Nations, even though Indonesia has a non-permanent seat in the Security Council until December 2020, President Jokowi, unlike his predecessors, has not attended nor delivered a single speech before the General Assembly. Issues of foreign policy were also not prominent in Jokowi's 2019 election manifesto. The focus instead, in part due to the threats posed by the insurgency, was on issues such as security, decentralization, human resources, and good governance.

Finally, the increasing international pressure on the Indonesian government to limit its military response, particularly from Australia, the European Union, and the United Kingdom together with the severe diplomatic pressure exerted by Indonesian authorities on countries

receiving Papuan refugees, demonstrate that the current situation is impacting Indonesia's global diplomatic status.

### **West Papua insurgency trends to monitor in 2020**

The next 12 months will determine whether Jokowi's multi-party coalition is capable of finalizing the timing of the planned visit of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (currently Michelle Bachelet), which aims to address the Nduga humanitarian situation.

Indeed, Indonesia has in principle committed to granting the UN Human Rights Office access to Papua. But little progress toward this end is apparent. Despite issuing an invitation to the office in February 2018 to visit the territory, the government flounders when it comes to setting an actual date (Jakarta Post, 2020).

If a date is set during Jokowi's presidency for the UN visit, this could soften decades worth of persistent criticism of human rights violations in Papua, violations that include suppression of political dissent, torture, extrajudicial killings, and systemic police and military violence.

It would also go some way toward improving Indonesia's global standing as other countries, including Australia and New Zealand, have urged Jakarta to set a clear timeframe for the UN visit to Papua to address allegations of human rights violations and the root causes of the conflict.

As of February 2020, the way towards peace seems ill-engaged as the trial on January 21 of the 2 students convicted of racially abusing a group of Papuan students in the incident that triggered the 2019 deadly protests, sparked further outrage. This first-ever racial discrimination trial could be interpreted as an encouraging sign, but West Papuan activists say the proposed punishment to be too light. Prosecutors have demanded prison sentences of 8 and 12 months for Arifin and Andriansyah respectively, saying their actions sparked massive protests in several Papuan cities.

Emmanuel Gobay, director of the Legal Aid Foundation in Papua, said the light sentences demanded by the prosecutor were not long enough. "We are very disappointed considering the impact of their crime on the Papuan people," Gobay said. What the prosecutors are calling for will not serve as a deterrent to others, he said. However, Andreas Harsono, Indonesian researcher for Human Rights Watch, said the proposed sentences, although lenient, were a step in the right direction in the fight against racism in Indonesia.

On February 5, Arifin and Andriansyah were respectively sentenced of 5 and 10 months in jail. A third student was also sentenced to 7 months in jail. Marthen Goo from Papua Itu Kita, an advocacy group, said the punishment did not match with "the damage triggered by the defendants' actions." The light sentences showed that "racism is not only seen in their words but also in terms of law enforcement," he said. "The government continues to show different treatment towards us and other citizens. The law is sharp for us, while for others it is blunt," he told

This year, dozens of Papuans will be on trial for getting involved in the anti-racism protests with the threat of a higher sentence.

March 2020 brought a new spur of violence in West Papua. Between February 29 and March 3, the world's largest gold, owned by the US firm Freeport McMoRan and the Indonesian government and seen by separatists as a symbol of Indonesian rule was again the target of the OPM rebels. 2 attacks claimed by the West Papua Liberation Army on security forces were reported near the Gasberg gold mine in Indonesia's easternmost Papua region. These attacks

left 1 soldier killed and 8 police officers wounded. Further, it caused nearly 2,000 villagers to flee the mining town of Tembagapura.

The Liberation Army claimed that the attacks came after a Papuan civilian was shot dead by the Indonesian military in a gold-panning area of a local river. This new wave of clashes seems to set the tone for 2020 as Benny Wenda, the United Liberation Movement for West Papua chair, said Papuan military fighters had a right to defend ancestral lands against an invading force and accused Freeport of providing support to Indonesian forces to carry out mass killings and depopulate local villages.

## **Conclusion**

The actions of the “Free Papua Movement” and the related counter-insurgency operations of the government have created a conflict that impacts not only the security of the country but also its business and diplomatic relationships worldwide.

According to sources, even though the latest wave of unrest seems to have settled down, the resurgence of violence cannot be ruled out since elements originally creating tensions, namely racism, ethnic contrasts and separatist drives, are far from being eradicated.

Besides, tensions could escalate again if the idea of re-categorizing West Papuan ‘armed criminal groups’ as separatists, proposed in January by the Chief of Indonesia’s Presidential Staff General Moeldoko, goes through. This would place any response to the separatist activity under the jurisdiction of the military as opposed to the police. Such a move would likely lead to a stronger military presence.

However, West Papuan independentists have traditionally been treated as ‘armed criminal groups’ and will likely continue to be so unless there is a significant shift in their modus operandi on in the policies adopted by the government to counter this issue.

The second term of Jokowi’s Presidency, inaugurated on Sunday, October 20 will be determinant in understanding how the situation will evolve in the area. The president will now face the difficult task of delivering on his promises of economic growth and genuine autonomy to West Papuans while confronting the issue of racism and dampening the calls for independence that threaten to carve out part of the country.

## **Sources:**

European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center (ESISC), WORLD TERROR WATCH Database, Brussels 2019 and 2020.

MASSOLA, "Why there's unrest in the Indonesian province of Papua", *The Sydney Herald*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/why-there-s-unrest-in-the-indonesian-province-of-papua-20190905-p52098.html>

KUMAR, HENMAN, "Papua terrorism risk", IHS Markit, March 14, 2019, <https://ihs-markit.com/research-analysis/papua-terrorism-risk.html>

BRUNDIGE, KING, VAHALI, VLADECK, YUAN, "Indonesian Human Rights Abuses in West Papua: Application of the Law of Genocide to the History of Indonesian Control", *Allard K. Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic Yale Law School*, April 2004, [https://law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/Intellectual\\_Life/West\\_Papua\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/Intellectual_Life/West_Papua_final_report.pdf)

CHEW, "Explained: what has led to the violent riots in Indonesia's Papua?", *South China Morning Post*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/explained/article/3023640/explained-riots-indonesias-papua-region?fbclid=IwAR1vF7AI6Q487BJAD6UNwUv3SdVzrGywXWCnE27TadOgQs-SotGWO42sQ8Uk>

PURWANINGSIH, "Papua killings revive debate on decades-old conflict", *DW*, December 10, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/papua-killings-revive-debate-on-decades-old-conflict/a-46664456>

PATAUD CELERIER, "Les Papous minoritaires en Papouasie", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Février 2015, [https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2015/02/PATAUD\\_CELERIER/52622](https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2015/02/PATAUD_CELERIER/52622)

SINGH, "Why is West Papua in Constant Turmoil?", *The Diplomat*, September 12, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/09/why-is-west-papua-in-constant-turmoil/>

KARENI, "2020: A year of meaningful diplomacy over Papua?", *The Jakarta Post*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/02/03/2020-a-year-meaningful-diplomacy-over-papua.html>

FIRDAUS, MAYBERRY, "‘State-in-waiting’: Papua's rebels unite against Indonesia rule", *Al Jazeera*, July 5, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/papua-rebels-unite-indonesia-rule-190703041548093.html>