Massacre in West Papua

A first-hand account

Mike Head
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Thanks to the efforts of two Australian aid workers, reports have begun to appear in the media of a ferocious massacre carried out by the Indonesian military regime in the West Papuan town of Biak on July 6. Rebecca Casey and Paul Meixner were in Biak, a town of some 30,000 people off the north coast of West Papua, on the day of the terror.

An estimated 150 people were killed and many more were wounded when troops, acting directly at the behest of Indonesian Armed Forces Chief and Defence Minister General Wiranto, opened fire with automatic weapons on a crowd sleeping beneath a raised West Papuan independence flag. The shooting continued for at least four hours as other residents were hauled from their homes. Other victims were tortured and in some case raped before being dumped in the sea by naval gunships.

Church and human rights groups issued first reports of the atrocity the following day. They reported that at about 5.30am on July 6, two navy vessels unloaded marines at Biak harbour while Hercules helicopters dropped about 130 troops from the 733rd infantry battalion of the regional military command. They further reported that troops had opened fire without warning. In other reports, General Wiranto was quoted as denouncing the Biak flag-raising as a 'revolt against the government' and declaring that the army would take 'firm action' against such protests. The *World Socialist Web Site* drew attention to some of these reports on July 10.

However, the Habibie government in Indonesia covered up the crime. It claims that only one or two people were killed when soldiers dispersed the crowd and took down the flag. This whitewash has been assisted by the Howard government in Australia, which sent an army intelligence officer to Biak later in July, ostensibly to gather information. The Howard government said nothing, and the world media took no interest.

But in the days following the massacre, Casey and Meixner secretly video-taped interviews with eye-witnesses, and took photographs and video footage of the scene, including shots of bullet holes in the tower where the flag had flown.

Casey told the *WSWS* what happened on that morning. It was the fourth day on which the striped 'morning star' flag of the West Papuan independence movement had fluttered from the top of a 35-metre water tower at Biak's jetty, protected by some 200 people.

'Our friends told us to stay in our house on that day. Most of them knew that an attack would occur. The military commander had told people the night before that they had to leave the flag area.

'At 5.30am we heard rapid fire gunshots--the sound of machine gun-style weapons. It went for four hours, on and off. We were advised to stay inside the house for three days, because if the military knew that we had seen anything, it would be dangerous for us. But people visited us, sometimes in hiding, and described the events.

'People were sleeping out under the flag on July 6. What happened was an absolute outrage. The troops opened fire without warning. People were shot like animals, whether they ran or they stayed. Most were shot in the legs but some were shot in the body.

'The troops then went to surrounding houses in the dockside area and dragged people out. Other people arriving at the jetty from outlying islands were also seized. Hundreds of people were herded together--demonstrators and non-demonstrators; wounded and non-wounded.

'They were forced to lie down, face up, in the blazing sun. The troops walked over them, kicking them, for a couple of hours. Then the soldiers forced them to crawl along the road to the prison, bashing them with rifle butts.

'About 200 people were locked in cells--28 to a cell--with only one 44-gallon drum of water between them. Many became sick. The only food they were given was old rice and vegetables. Some were released but only if they agreed to work as informants, to find out who raised the flag, who had given the protesters food and who had made a second flag.

'We thought that at least 20 people had been shot dead and over 100 wounded but the evidence now shows that up to 150 were killed. Many of the wounded had to go back to their villages without medical attention because the hospital refused to treat them. A lot of people were missing and many still are.

'We heard that victims had been dropped overboard by navy ships. Before we left Biak several days later two bodies had already been washed up on the coast. Many more bodies have since been washed up. The Indonesian authorities claimed these were victims of the tsunami (tidal wave) in Papua New Guinea, but that was two weeks after the killings.'

Casey outlined the background to the Biak flag-raising. 'When Suharto resigned in May, there was a lot of discussion that the West Papuan people would finally be able to win their freedom from Indonesian rule. People thought that under international law, if they flew the West Papuan flag for 72 hours they would have independence. They also believed that they would have US backing, because of statements from Washington.

'Conditions under Indonesian rule are extremely poor. There are no decent food supplies or health facilities. Many people die of malaria or other diseases at young ages, for no good reason. The economic crisis has made things worse, with the price of rice trebling.

'The West Papuans have been second class citizens for decades. The wealth produced by the copper mine at Freeport and from the logging operations, run by companies connected to the military, has not been shared by the people.'

Casey said she and Meixner had given their information to some organisations when they returned to Australia, in the hope that action would be taken. 'I can't believe there hasn't been an outcry about what happened,' she said.

It is now known, from an account given by a local lawyer to a visiting Australian student, that after the initial Biak massacre 139 people, including women and children, were taken out to sea on two navy boats. According to two survivors, women were raped and several bodies were cut up and placed in bags. Churches documented the discovery of 23

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bodies in offshore fishing nets on July 11, six days before the tidal wave in neighbouring Papua New Guinea. In all, church investigators have now documented the discovery of 70 bodies.

The massacre did not end the resistance to Indonesian rule. Last month another series of pro-independence demonstrations took place across West Papua. Many government buildings were reportedly burnt to the ground. Up to 20 people, including Dr Philip Karma who was arrested during the Biak massacre, have been charged with rebellion or treason and face life imprisonment.

Widespread opposition to Indonesian rule

Biak is the main town and trading port of an island of the same name off the north coast of West Papua, or Irian Jaya, the name that the Suharto regime gave to the western half of New Guinea. The Biak massacre was part of a wider assault by the Habibie government on students and pro-independence supporters across West Papua in early July.

The previous month had seen a wave of protests against military abuses and in favour of independence, sparked in part by a letter sent to Indonesian President Habibie by 15 US Congressmen on May 22. The letter, widely circulated in West Papua, urged Habibie to initiate 'direct good faith dialogues with the peoples of East Timor and Irian Jaya on human rights and a just solution to their political status'.

On June 22, about 100 members of a group called Communications Forum of the Younger Generation of Irian Jaya demonstrated in front of the Ministry of Justice in Jakarta, the Indonesian capital, demanding that all West Papuan political prisoners be freed. Justice Minister Muladi invited the group in to discuss the issue but said he had no authority to order the releases. He said he would convey their concerns to the next meeting of cabinet members responsible for security and political affairs.

Between July 1 and 3, demonstrations in support of West Papuan independence were held in the provincial capital of Jayapura and the towns of Sorong, Nabire and Biak. On July 1 and 2, hundreds of demonstrators converged on the provincial parliament building in Jayapura, where they were violently dispersed by riot police after assembly members refused to meet them. On the second day, 41 people were detained after several buildings were stoned. The next day, two students were shot near the Cenderawasih University when troops opened fire on a crowd after students beat up a police intelligence agent.

Violent clashes also erupted in Sorong on July 2 after thousands of young people calling themselves Reform Forum of Students and People of Sorong presented nine pro-independence demands to the district council. When their demands went unheeded, they burned the district council building, several stores and a car owned by the district head. As troops arrived, five people were reportedly shot.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer was acquainted with these incidents when he met Habibie in Jakarta a few days after the first reports of the shootings at Biak. His spokesman claimed that Downer was 'deeply concerned' by the reports and raised them with Habibie. These concerns were not made public however.

Although the fall of Suharto, followed by the circulation of the US Congressional letter, provided the impetus for the pro-independence upsurge, flag-raisings such as that at Biak have for some years been a symbol of opposition to Indonesian rule. For example, in December 1988, 60 people were arrested after raising the flag at the Mandala sports stadium in Jayapura. Over the following month, 37 of them were convicted of subversion and sentenced to prison terms of between 2 and 20 years.

For 35 years, under Sukarno, Suharto and Habibie, Indonesian rule has been characterised by military brutality and social deprivation. West Papua, with a population of some 1.8 million, has some of the worst social, health and education conditions in the world. Malnutrition affects one-fifth of its people, including half the children under five. With an annual health budget of about $1 per head, it has the poorest health standards of all 27 Indonesian provinces, including the highest infant and maternal mortality rates. The infant mortality rate ranges from 70 to 200 per 1,000. The illiteracy rate--30.5 percent, and as high as 81.5 percent in the highlands--is double the national average. Indonesia as a whole is rated by the UN as having the lowest health and education levels in Southeast Asia.

These conditions prevail even though West Papua has for many years produced significant quantities of oil for the Anglo-Dutch firm Shell and others. Moreover, the territory contains one of the richest copper and gold mines in the world--the $40 billion Freeport mine, owned jointly by the Freeport McMoRan company of the US, Rio Tinto of Britain and the Jakarta regime. And of the 41.5 million hectares of forest in West Papua, almost 30 million have been set aside for timber cutting--much of which has already been logged out.

The people and natural resources of New Guinea have been plundered for more than a century by colonial powers and giant companies. In 1883 the island was partitioned by three European powers. The Dutch government claimed the western half as part of the Dutch East Indies, while the German and British regimes divided the eastern half into German New Guinea in the north and British Papua in the south. Australia took advantage of World War I and Germany's subsequent defeat to take control of the eastern half.

When The Netherlands was forced to grant independence to Indonesia in 1949 it retained West Papua, claiming to be preparing it for separate independence. Indonesia's president Sukarno continued to assert sovereignty, relying on the borders established in the colonial carve-up. The Australian ruling class also hoped to annex the territory to augment its colony in Papua New Guinea. But in 1962 the US intervened to insist that the Dutch make way for the Indonesian military, with which it had established close ties.

In August 1962, the Dutch concluded an agreement with Indonesia to transfer sovereignty to the UN, paving the way for Indonesian troops to move into the territory in 1963. In 1969 the Indonesian regime, then headed by General Suharto, conducted a sham referendum in which the UN sanctioned a vote by 1,025 handpicked electors to 'remain with Indonesia'.

Indonesian rule has been a vehicle for a particularly intensive exploitation of West Papua's people for corporate profit. West Papua's suffering also demonstrates the wider and devastating impact that capitalism has had on the lives of people throughout the region. In fact, the pattern of social misery alongside corporate wealth is very similar across the border in the former Australian colony of Papua New Guinea. Formal independence since 1975 has not elevated living standards in PNG, except for a tiny ruling elite that serves the interests of Rio Tinto, BHP, BP and other major companies.

See Also:
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