

Eye-witness account of West Papua massacre

# "People were shot, bleeding and lying on the ground"

## Part 1

**Mike Head**

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Paul Meixner and Rebecca Casey

On July 6, just weeks after the resignation of General Suharto, the Habibie regime in Indonesia carried out a massacre of more than 150 people in the remote West Papuan town of Biak, after hundreds of residents had participated in raising a West Papuan independence flag.

Indonesia armed forces chief and Defence Minister, General Wiranto, denounced the flag-raising as a 'revolt against the government' and sent in troops from Ambon island to conduct a slaughter. Soldiers opened fire with automatic weapons on a defenceless crowd, hauled residents from their homes, beat and tortured scores of people, including children, and later used naval gunships to dump bodies and victims in the sea.

The Howard government in Australia, which sent an army intelligence officer to Biak later in July to gather information, knows of these events but has remained silent while the Habibie regime has covered up the atrocities.

News of the massacre has emerged largely because of the presence in Biak of two Australian aid workers, Rebecca Casey and Paul Meixner, who interviewed survivors and took photographs and video footage of the scene of the shootings.

*The World Socialist Web Site interviewed Casey and Meixner. We asked them first to explain the background to the raising of the West Papuan flag in Biak and other parts of West Papua in the first days of July.*

**Paul:** Most people there want independence. Then there was a letter from the United States, which people believed came from President Bill Clinton, to the effect that the people of East Timor and West Papua must be set free. In fact, it turned out to be a letter from US Congressmen urging Habibie to hold discussions with representatives from East Timor and West Papua.

**Rebecca:** By the time that news of this letter filtered through to the people of Biak they believed that Bill Clinton had written a letter to the Indonesian government saying, you must allow West Papua and East Timor to become independent now. People thought they had the backing of the US government, full stop.

**Paul:** There was also a belief among some people that if they flew the

flag for 72 hours then West Papua would become their own country. There was another rumour that if Indonesians came to attack, the Germans, the Dutch or the French, or perhaps the Americans, or the Australians, would come to the aid of the West Papuan people.

**Rebecca:** The flag-raising was also timed to coincide with the anniversary of what would have been the day of independence, July 1, although we did not know it at the time. We did know that more and more people were openly talking about freedom and independence, whereas normally they just don't. If they talk about it, they certainly don't talk about it openly and they don't talk about it with foreigners. All of a sudden, there was talk of independence.

Quite a few hundred people were involved in the flag-raising. When we went down the markets everyone was talking about freedom and independence. Then we drove for an hour out to the resort on the island and the staff there were walking past and saying 'Merdeka' (freedom) to each other. It seemed widespread.

*WSWS: Did the events in Jakarta and across Indonesia in May have an impact?*

**Rebecca:** The excitement and the open talking started after Suharto resigned. But interestingly when Suharto resigned we did not even know about it until 24 hours later, because no-one was talking about it. There were no big parties on the street, as we thought there might be, probably because they would be in big trouble. But then they started getting excited, so they did recognise the link.

The flag went up on the Thursday afternoon. We knew that because two of the people we were working with disappeared for the afternoon and went down there. Later on we heard that everyone had been dispersed with tear gas. We were advised not to go there.

On the Friday morning, we thought that everyone would have been dispersed so we went into town on public transport. Man-made barricades were on the streets--big tree trunks and rocks--stopping traffic. We started walking in the direction of the Post Office and it was strange because there were only West Papuans on the streets and no soldiers or police anywhere.

People said to us, you can come through because you are Europeans. We looked up and saw the flag flying. People asked us if we were happy to see the flag flying, telling us that they were going to become independent. We came across a burnt-out army truck with its tyres flattened. People told us there had been trouble in the morning.

**Paul:** They had beaten off a military attack that morning--two attacks by assault police, in which two police were killed. Police had been withdrawn. They had baton-charged that morning and the people had fought them back and killed two police in doing so.

**Rebecca:** People had cordoned the area off with barricades to stop the trucks coming back in. We went around the corner and there were about 200 people around the water tower under the flag and there was a feeling of real excitement, but also tension. We videoed a little and then left, because we did not know what was going to happen next.

From what we knew, people just camped under the flag and danced and sang and read from the Bible. Whole families were camped there, including women and children.

On the Sunday night we were told that the people under the flag had been given a deadline of 5pm to leave. Then we were told the deadline might be extended because it was a Sunday. When we asked our boss what would happen if the people did not leave, he said the army would come in. I asked if he meant that the army would shoot them, and he said yes.

That Sunday night there were soldiers everywhere and it was not safe to go anywhere. We heard that four Hercules planes had landed at the airport, carrying on soldiers from Ambon. The military had plenty of forces on the island but they did not want the local soldiers to do the shooting; they wanted people from outside.

**Paul:** We also saw army trucks full of West Papuans, whom our friend explained were 'contras'--local men who had been sponsored, bribed or paid to set themselves up as a pro-Indonesian force. There is a long history of that in Indonesia.

*WSWS: What happened on July 6?*

**Paul:** On the Monday morning we heard the shots, from about 6am onwards for about four hours.

**Rebecca:** The first thing we noticed was that the streets were absolutely empty. Normally on a week morning there were taxis or little mini buses going up and down the streets, tooting their horns with music blaring. There would be students--high school students and nursing students--everywhere. Normally there was noise, noise, noise from dawn to dusk. That was non-existent that morning, and then we heard the gunshots from town. Sometimes the shots were close and sometimes they were further away.

We learned of what happened because people came and told us and also because the hospital was only 50 metres down our street. We saw soldiers all around the hospital in full riot gear. Later in the day we saw people carrying containers of food and then cautiously retreating. People down the street told us they were families trying to see their wounded relatives in the hospital and being turned back by the soldiers; not being allowed to see the patients or to take them food.

The male nurses' dormitories were across the road from us and they would come out and describe how many people were in the hospital. They said there were 22 people there with bullet wounds but that a lot of people had been turned away by the administrator, who said they were the military's responsibility to treat, because the military had shot them. There was also a navy hospital and apparently a lot of people were sent there.

**Paul:** In the hospital, people were handcuffed to the bed or had their hands tied behind them so that they could not escape before they were questioned.

**Rebecca:** When we found out the extent of what had happened, we left our house and spoke to a friend who had just been released from the police station. He told us what happened on the day.

**Paul:** He had been asleep near the tower. He was awakened by shooting from the army all around them, moving in. People tried to run but they were shot. If they remained behind they were shot too.

Eventually the survivors were rounded up and they were forced to crawl on their stomachs to the dock area, about 300 metres away. There they were forced to lie on their backs and look at the midday sun for about two hours. They had to keep their eyes open while soldiers marched all over them--their stomachs and their faces--and kicked them and hit them with rifle butts.

**Rebecca:** He had bruising all down one side of his face. He was sunburnt as well. He said that in the shooting the soldiers must have used some rubber bullets but mostly live ammunition. He was hit by a rubber bullet, yet he was OK. It bounced off him. But people either side of him were shot and were bleeding and lying on the ground. One guy had his intestines hanging out. Another person was shot in the head. The leader was shot in his elbows and his knees repeatedly at point blank range. Once he fell to the ground, the soldiers rifled-butted him.

Our friend described bodies, blood and dead people all around him. He saw people being killed. And he said that a lot more people were missing. People could not find their brothers, husbands and sons.

Children who were there, or who had heard the shooting and come down and then tried to run home, were caught by soldiers and rifle-butted in the head.

Soldiers went to all the houses in the dock area and said, right, everyone get out. They took those people down to docks and beat them up as well. Then the 200 who were tortured at the docks were put into jail cells, about 28 to the cell.

**Paul:** Down at the docks there were people from neighbouring islands who came in to buy petrol and rice. They were included and rounded up. For no reason, four people were tied up with ropes, thrown into the water and then dragged up and beaten. There was no real reason--it was just to try to get information out of them.

**Rebecca:** Another survivor came and told us an almost identical account. He had been in hiding and came to tell us what had happened. We taped what he said and gave the footage to a church investigation team.

By this time we thought that the military would come and search our house. Two army intelligence guys followed us when we went around with our video camera. We were called down to the police station and asked all sorts of questions about what we were doing and why we were taking video footage. They did not want foreigners snooping around. They were afraid that we would take the information out.

**Paul:** Later one of our friends told us that people had been taken away to be dumped at sea or to be taken to Jakarta.

The people who came to tell us what happened were brave. They came at night, they were very nervous. They wanted us to tell the outside world what had happened.

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