

# Eye-witness account of West Papua massacre - "We saw terrible slum-like conditions and a very strong army presence"

## Part 2

**Mike Head**

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*On July 6, the Habibie regime in Indonesia killed more than 150 people in the remote West Papuan town of Biak, after hundreds 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 events in Biak took place against a background of severe social deprivation. After almost a century of Dutch occupation, followed by 35 years of Indonesian rule, West Papua's 1.8 million people have some of the worst living, health and education conditions in the world, and these have been intensified by Indonesia's economic crisis over the past 18 months. At the same time, West Papua is rich in gold, copper, oil and timber.*

*News of the massacre has emerged largely because of the presence in Biak of two Australian aid workers, Rebecca Casey and Paul Meixner. In the second part of an interview with Casey and Meixner, the World Socialist Web Site asked them to describe the social, economic and political situation in Biak and West Papua as a whole.*

**Paul:** Conditions are pretty bad, and a lot worse than many Javanese towns and villages that I have seen. On the surface it looks OK. You expect to see poor quality houses, and they are there. But it's things like health that show the real situation. People can catch a cold and die, or a mild case of malaria and die.

**Rebecca:** Four people that we knew died while we were there. That was just in two months. Basically they died from not getting medical treatment--just from getting sick.

While we there, when the economic crisis started, there were no medicines anywhere in Indonesia. One of the big problems was that the hospitals and pharmacies ran out of medicine. No-one could get anything.

There is very little medicine and people cannot afford to buy it anyway. We bought some anti-malarial tablets at a pharmacy, and it was reasonably cheap, but like many things, it was out-of-date stock from developed countries. So what is the point of taking that? And people don't know what to take. There is no-one there to advise them on what to take, how much to take and when to take it.

**Paul:** There is a hospital at the naval base but otherwise there is just the one small hospital. It has only eight medium-sized buildings. We saw the intensive care ward and it was just a big room with about 20 bare beds. We did not see any equipment at all.

**Rebecca:** So conditions are really poor. I was shocked. I lived in Papua

New Guinea when I was younger and it was like a developed country compared to West Papua.

*WSWS: What about food and malnutrition?*

**Rebecca:** I did see many kids with swollen bellies. There is malnutrition. But most of the Biak people will grow their own food. So they may have vegetables and taro, some cassava, but they won't necessarily have meat, unless they went fishing themselves. Things like chicken, pork and fish were very expensive in the markets and getting more so.

**Paul:** They might eat rice with a few vegetables once a day. They just don't get the right nutrition. That is why they get sick easily.

**Rebecca:** You would see people buying a big sack of rice for their family but often they would not have the money for food. Even people that we worked with would tell us that they had not been paid and could not feed their families, so we would give them money. We always had people asking us for money and it was always for things like malaria medicine and food. No-one had anything.

That was the case due to the economic crisis, but it is always hard, because people have to pay for everything--even for their kids to go to school. Parents have to find the money somehow to send them to school, and for their books on top of that. Teachers we talked to--other volunteers teaching English--said sometimes kids would turn up for school who had only eaten once a day and had never ever been able to buy books.

*WSWS: Tell us about the conditions in the schools.*

**Paul:** The only school is a group of bare-looking buildings around a grassless patch of earth. There are no windows. They have desks and chairs on a concrete floor and a board, but often they could not even afford blackboard paint, so the teachers could not use the boards properly.

There is no electricity, so when it gets dark and stormy you can't see; and when it rains heavily on the tin roof you can't hear the teacher. There is electricity in Biak but not in the classrooms that we saw.

When we went to Bali we saw some comparatively first-rate schools, and even then their conditions were a lot lower than Australian schools. But the schools in West Papua are even worse.

**Rebecca:** On Biak there is nothing beyond primary and high school. The only university is in Jayapura, the West Papuan capital on the mainland. Most people we knew had only gone to the end of primary school. Some of the lucky ones had obtained scholarships or had been sponsored by someone and had gotten to Jakarta or Jayapura for a university education. But they were very few.

There are no computers in the schools. There is no way for people to have access to the Internet via schools and libraries. There are some

libraries with very few books in them.

WSWS: *What is the housing like?*



A typical house in Biak

**Paul:** [Showing a picture of a house on the beach] This is a typical house, although it is out along the beach. There is no electricity and water. In Biak itself most homes had electricity but not water. Water usually came from a communal tap supplied by the government. The government would pump it in for a couple of hours a day. That was the case in the house where we stayed. You would still have to boil the water.

In Jayapura, the capital, we saw hundreds of people living in slums, in one case alongside a brand new bank building. [See picture] Both West Papuans and Indonesian transmigrants were living in the shanties. It was like walking through Soweto. The shantytown goes quite a way--there are markets and shops in there as well.

WSWS: *How are the conditions in Jayapura?*

**Paul:** We saw terrible slum-like conditions and a very strong army presence. We also saw rich people, who were usually Indonesians. The army would march up and down every Friday, on the main street, with soldiers jogging with their shorts off. The jogging wasn't just for exercise; it was a show of force.

**Rebecca:** That intensified in the leadup to the so-called elections in March, when Suharto was returned by the MPR [national assembly]. Alcohol was also taken off sale at that time--not that it was a problem because no-one could afford it anyway.

WSWS: *What was the scale of the troop presence?*

**Paul:** There are a lot of bases, even on Biak island. We don't know the numbers but there were always soldiers around. They did not march up and down and parade with tanks as they do in Jayapura, but they are there in their barracks and you would see them marching around. There was also a naval base.

In Biak it was a more relaxed display of the military, compared to Jayapura, partly because the Biak people had been subdued some time earlier.

WSWS: *According to the government's statistics, some 80,000 Indonesian families have been relocated in West Papua from other parts of Indonesia under the transmigration program since 1969. Can you tell us about the conditions of the transmigrants?*

**Rebecca:** A lot of the people who had come over were living very poorly. We heard quite a bit about this from across West Papua. They had come in and attempted to grow crops, but that did not work because of the land on which they were put as transmigrants. They would move to the nearby towns and try to set up work there. Sometimes it would work and other times it would not.

A lot of them were living just as poorly as the West Papuans, in slums as well. They were usually poor farmers. People who are rich come over to West Papua on their own steam and some of them will make money. Even then, they are not wealthy by Australian terms.

**Paul:** Nearly every West Papuan person we spoke to did not like transmigration. They saw it as another way to get rid of them and annihilate the West Papuan people.

Those who come to West Papua by their own volition tend to have commercial skills and dominate the markets. So in the markets, the

Indonesians generally have the big stores and the West Papuans are outside sitting on the ground selling smaller amounts.

WSWS: *Is there much open political discussion in West Papua? Are there parties, factions and a political life? And what is the state of the media?*

**Rebecca:** There is no political discussion.

**Paul:** There is one Indonesian-language newspaper based in Jayapura and satellite TV from Jakarta. It is all in Indonesian. If you don't have a satellite all you can get is the Indonesian family channel.

There is no local language media. In any case, there are about 300 languages across West Papua.

**Rebecca:** Most people are probably using Indonesian anyway. For most people it is their first language, with their local language as a second. On Biak there is one language and that extends to other islands as well.

**Paul:** Quite a few people listen to Radio Australia's Indonesian language broadcasts. There are telephones available. Email and the Internet exist, but only for well-educated people and church organisations. Some human rights activists have access.

WSWS: *West Papua is the site of one of the richest copper and gold mines in the world--the Freeport mine, owned jointly by the Freeport McMoRan company of the US, Rio Tinto of Britain and Australia, and the Jakarta regime. Did you get to see it?*

**Rebecca:** No, but we flew over it. You could see how the waste tailings had wiped out the trees downstream for kilometres. There was a big river coming down from the mine, with stalks of dead trees sticking out.

**Paul:** Everybody we talked to resented the mine, but many wanted to work there because the wages were high, compared to the levels in West Papua.

**Rebecca:** Resource-wise West Papua is not a poor place. It is rich. We heard that 10 percent of the Indonesian government's income comes from the Freeport mine and that the mine does not pay taxes.

We saw one failed economic development project on Biak island. It was the holiday resort. There is an international airport there. It used to be a stopover to other places in Indonesia, particularly for those coming from America, but not any more. The resort has something like 500 rooms, 300 of which have been closed up because there is nobody staying there. At any one time there are about five people staying there.

The government wanted to make it another Bali. There were plans for six international resorts on Biak. It was a Habibie plan for a duty-free resort town, even though it rains for seven months of the year, every day. This was the development plan for Biak. It is a beautiful place though, with coral and fish.

WSWS: *What should happen in West Papua?*

**Rebecca:** It is hard to say. People talk about independence but their idea of it is that everyone from Indonesia leaves. We asked about whether they had enough knowledge to function on their own. They said all the educated people from Biak would come back. I just don't know.

**Paul:** The people there need justice and health, and appropriate development. I can't be more specific. Independence may be good if it is well managed but I fear ethnic tensions.

**Rebecca:** There might be a cargo-cult mentality, with people thinking they would have what the Indonesians have immediately. There might be disappointment. I don't think there is a clear-cut answer.

WSWS: *If the underlying economic order did not change, would it make any difference?*

**Rebecca:** That would still be the danger. West Papua might get independence but who controls the mine? Who takes care of those things? You might end up with a few big fish in a small pond and so there would be no equity anyway.

See Also:

*Eye-witness account of West Papua massacre: Part 1*  
'People were shot, bleeding and lying on the ground'

[28 November 1998]



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