

Ambush near US-owned mine in Papua suggests Indonesian army involvement

John Roberts
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In the early afternoon of August 31, an estimated 15 gunmen opened fire with M-16 assault rifles on three Land Cruisers travelling on a mountain road near the huge US-owned Freeport gold and copper mine in the Indonesian province of Papua. Three people, one Indonesian and two Americans, were killed and 10 others wounded. All were staff members at the mine's international school.

Indonesian authorities immediately blamed armed Papuan separatists of the Free Papua Movement (OPM) for the ambush. At this stage it is impossible to say with any certainty who was responsible. But the evidence available so far casts doubt over the official version of events and points to the possible involvement of the Indonesian military in the attack—either directly, or indirectly through various surrogates.

The OPM had very little to gain from an attack, which was immediately condemned by the US embassy in Jakarta as an “outrageous act of terrorism”. On the other hand, the Indonesian armed forces (TNI), which has been pressing for a crackdown against separatists, certainly had a number of motives, as well as the opportunity and the means, for the murders.

If the OPM carried out the attack, it chose a particularly unsuitable site. The ambush took place 20 km from the mine on the jungle road to the town of Tembagapura, but just a few hundred metres from a manned military security post. Even in the prevailing foggy conditions, there was the risk of a counterattack by the Indonesian military.

Moreover, the attackers were armed with M-16s—standard issue for the TNI and the police, but rare among OPM fighters, who have relied on primitive weapons, including bows and arrows. None of the OPM factions have a history of murdering foreigners.

Because of the misty conditions, none of the victims saw their attackers. But Indonesian security chiefs

immediately rushed to blame a number of OPM culprits—apparently without much coordination.

The provincial police chief, Major General Made Pastika, speculated that people from the village of Bantu, three hours walk through the jungle from the ambush site, may have been involved. “It is very possible that the killers were based there. There is no other base camp in the area,” he said. Police reported that they shot and killed a man near the ambush site on September 1 but have released few details of the gun battle.

Indonesian army chief General Ryamizard Ryacudu and Papuan provincial military chief Major-General Mahidin Simbolon had a second, equally unsubstantiated theory. They claimed that an OPM splinter group headed by Kelly Kwalik had carried out the killings. Kwalik, who has previously been accused of kidnapping but not harming foreigners, issued a statement denying any involvement.

According to a *Washington Post* report, other military officials named another OPM group led by Titus Morib, as the possible organiser of the killings. But a Papuan-based police investigator dismissed the possibility, saying that the attack was too far from Morib's area of operation for him to be a likely suspect.

The official response to the latest murders recalls the reaction following the killing of Theys Eluay, president of the pro-independence Papua Presidium Council, last November. Eluay was found dead in his car after leaving a dinner with the provincial commander of Kopassus—the TNI's notorious special forces unit. His driver fled the scene and has not been seen since.

In the immediate aftermath of Eluay's murder, Indonesian police and army spokesmen floated a series of mutually contradictory explanations—ranging from suicide, to a heart attack, to murder at the hands of his own supporters. So crude were the methods of the killers, however, that the police were eventually forced to indict

12 Kopassus soldiers, including the local commander.

The OPM itself has denied any involvement in the Freeport ambush and joined human rights groups in Papua and Jakarta in calling for an independent international inquiry into the incident.

The Papua Presidium Council, a legal organisation based in the provincial capital Jayapura, issued a statement on September 2, declaring: “It is becoming more and more evident that the Indonesian security forces are involved in creating provocation and instigating violence.

“An attack on foreign nationals and on Freeport and consequently blaming the OPM is on the one hand an effort to discredit the OPM as a terrorist organisation and on the other hand a warning to Freeport that it cannot operate without the protection of the Indonesian army.”

An article in the *Australian Financial Review* pointed out that the Indonesian military has operated what amounts to a protection racket to milk money from Freeport, the world’s largest copper and gold mine. It reported “a pattern of incidents over the years that have the hallmarks of stand-over tactics by the Indonesian military to extract more money and resources from Freeport in exchange for their role in providing ‘security’.”

The mine has certainly provoked anger and resentment over its impact on local villages. Even when the TNI has not had a hand in attacks on the mine, it has exploited any expressions of opposition for its own purposes. After major riots in 1996, the TNI prevailed upon Freeport to build a new army base in the area at the company’s expense, at a cost of \$US37 million.

As the article pointed out, even if Papuans or an OPM splinter group did carry out the ambush, that did not rule out the involvement of the Indonesian security forces. It noted that “over the years a number of so-called independence leaders in Papua have worked with the military”. Brigham Golden, a member of the US Council of Foreign Relations task force on Papua, told the newspaper: “The military in the past has used OPM elements as proxies.”

The TNI has a direct interest in maintaining a monopoly over security at the Freeport mine. The Indonesian state budget provides less than half the funds required to maintain the security apparatus. TNI officers have long supplemented their resources by legal and illegal business ventures, which in Papua have included logging operations and extortion of money from local and foreign-based companies. These operations in Papua were part of

the extensive and highly lucrative commercial network operated by the military at all levels throughout the archipelago, of which the vast Suharto business empire was just the apex.

Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, Indonesian had been under pressure from international investors to end these practices, including the “security arrangements” at places like Freeport. Military officials were reportedly angered by the mine management’s decision to appoint Tom Beanal, a leader of the Amungme tribe that claims traditional ownership of the mine lands, to the board of its Indonesian subsidiary. Whoever carried out the August 31 ambush, the military will use the opportunity to emphasise that the mine requires its protection.

More broadly, the TNI will also use the attack to insist on a crackdown on the OPM—a move that will strengthen its hand not only in Papua but elsewhere in Indonesia. The military played the key role in the protracted process of ousting Abdurrahman Wahid last year and installing Megawati Sukarnoputri as president. The generals were particularly critical of Wahid over his attempts to negotiate a deal with separatist movements in Papua and Aceh. Under Megawati, the TNI has intensified its operations in both provinces.

If it can pin the attack on the OPM and brand it as “terrorist” organisation, the TNI can bolster its case in Washington for the resumption of ties with the US military. For months, under the guise of its “global war on terrorism,” the Bush administration has been pushing for the overturn of a US Congressional ban on training and support for the Indonesian military. The attack on Freeport could provide a convenient pretext for the US to provide support for Indonesian operations in Papua.

If that is the case, however, the exercise could easily backfire. After initially pointing the finger at local Papuans, police chief Pastika indicated in an interview this week that he was examining possible army involvement. He said the military might have carried out the attack to extort money from the mine. “This is also one of the possibilities,” he said. “We are police and cannot ignore any of the possibilities.”



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