

Papuan “crisis” sparks debate over Australian intervention

Mike Head
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Increasingly anxious to stem a serious diplomatic conflict with the Indonesian regime, the Australian government has taken unprecedented military and legal steps to block the arrival of any further boatloads of asylum seekers from West Papua.

The moves follow escalating protests and threats of retaliation from Jakarta over last month’s decision by Canberra to grant temporary protection visas to 42 political activists and their families from the Indonesian-controlled western half of New Guinea. The group was led by a prominent separatist leader, Herman Wainggai.

A special meeting of Prime Minister John Howard’s National Security Committee on April 12 decided to send surveillance planes and warships to the Torres Strait to intercept and repel refugee boats. It also offered the Indonesian military, for the first time, a commitment to coordinate the two countries’ patrols.

In an even more far-reaching legal measure, the entire Australian continent, as well its offshore islands, will be “excised” from the refugee provisions of the Migration Act. In effect, any refugees that land in their boats on Australian territory, even the mainland, will be denied all rights to apply for asylum. This extends the Howard government’s infamous “Pacific Solution,” in which thousands of Middle Eastern refugees were forcibly transported to the remote South Pacific islands of Nauru and Manus in 2001-02.

Earlier, Howard last week announced a high-level inter-departmental review of the government’s asylum procedures, in order to give his department the final say in protection visa applications. “Foreign policy” and “national security” factors would be paramount, as well as “the importance of the relationship between Australia and Indonesia”. Howard confirmed that the review could allow Indonesian authorities access to information about refugees, ostensibly in order to respond to their claims of persecution, before visa decisions were made.

These policies constitute a flagrant violation of the international Refugee Convention—which forbids governments to expel, or in any other way expose, asylum seekers to face a “well-founded fear of persecution”. So blatant is Howard’s repudiation of international law that it has been condemned by significant sections of the political and media establishment. On April 13, former prime minister Malcolm Fraser accused the government of taking refugees “outside the law” and being “prepared to sacrifice any individual or group of individuals to suit Indonesian policy.”

At this stage, however, the government is doing everything it can to repair what Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has described as a “crisis” in its relations with the Indonesian government. In addition to withdrawing Jakarta’s ambassador to Australia, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has branded the visa decision “inappropriate

and unrealistic,” hinted at withdrawal of police and military cooperation and called for discussions with Howard on the future of the bilateral relationship.

The Indonesian elite is clearly alarmed by signs of Australian support for Papuan secession, which would have even greater implications than the 1999 Australian-led military intervention to back the breakaway of East Timor. Papua is far richer in oil, gas, gold, copper and other resources than East Timor. Any move for separation could fuel secessionist demands in other resource-rich and strategic parts of the far-flung Indonesia archipelago—notably Aceh, Borneo, Sulawesi and the Moluccas—throwing into doubt the viability of the Indonesian state itself.

Yudhoyono and the Indonesian military are concerned that once again, as in East Timor, separatists are trying to enlist Canberra’s backing, utilising Indonesian repression to plead for intervention on “humanitarian” grounds. Wainggai told *Time* magazine’s April 17 edition that increasing military intimidation late last year sealed the group’s decision to escape. For definite political reasons, however, they decided against slipping across the border into Papua New Guinea (PNG), as other separatist groups have done in the past. “We have not received any serious international attention by seeking asylum in PNG,” Wainggai said. “We decided that because of Australia’s role in taking responsibility in the Pacific area we would come here.”

“Australia’s role” since the Timor intervention has been to assert the country’s hegemony over the South Pacific. The Howard government’s aggressiveness accelerated after its participation in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, which was a quid pro quo for US backing in the Asia-Pacific. In mid 2003, Australian troops, police and officials were deployed to take over the Solomon Islands, and police and officials have been sent to take key government posts in Fiji and Papua New Guinea.

While the Papuan asylum seekers’ basic democratic right to asylum must be unconditionally defended, the working class should extend no support to their perspective—which is to appeal to Canberra for another neo-colonial intervention. The dispatch of Australian-led troops to East Timor in 1999 had nothing to do with protecting the lives and human rights of its long-oppressed people. Successive Australian governments backed the 1975 Indonesian invasion and occupation of the former Portuguese enclave, which led to the deaths of an estimated 200,000 people. The Howard government only shifted its policy at the last minute in 1999 to back East Timor’s “independence”—well after Indonesian militias had carried through their “scorched earth” pogrom.

Canberra’s only concern was to retain its grip over the huge oil and

gas reserves beneath the Timor Sea, an objective it has achieved by bullying the Timorese government. The supposedly “independent” statelet on the half island remains totally reliant on Australian-based and other foreign oil companies, as well as backing from Western governments and financial institutions, such as the World Bank. Its leaders are required to implement free-market measures that are intensifying the poverty and social deprivation suffered by the vast majority of the population.

In essence, the perspective of Papuan secession consists of setting up yet another unviably semi-colonial entity, dependent on Canberra and the major powers, and ruled by a local privileged elite that ruthlessly enforces their requirements.

The Papuan “crisis” has triggered divisions within the Australian political and media establishment. One camp backs Howard’s efforts to patch up relations with Jakarta, which have included repeated reiterations of Canberra’s respect for Indonesian sovereignty. Its opponents have openly canvassed the possibility of ultimate Australian intervention to back the formation of a breakaway West Papuan state, at least if the Indonesian regime proves unable to quell the mounting discontent in the territory.

For both sides, the overriding concern is how best to pursue the predatory interests of Australian capitalism. On the one hand, there is great anxiety to restore intimate ties with the Indonesian regime—which date back to General Suharto’s 1965-66 military coup—and repair the breach that occurred over East Timor. Yudhoyono, a former Suharto general, is regarded as the best bet for maintaining political stability across the archipelago and for fully opening up its natural resources and economy to exploitation by Australian and other foreign transnationals.

On the other hand, sections of the Australian ruling elite have long had designs on Indonesian Papua. Australian conglomerates, including Rio Tinto and BHP, already have large stakes there, as well as in neighbouring PNG. Rio Tinto is a partner in the New Orleans-based Freeport’s giant Grasberg gold and copper mine, whose value has soared since gold prices have reached 25-year highs during the recent period. Freeport is Indonesia’s largest single taxpayer, paying a reported \$1.5 billion last year.

Throughout the 1950s, the Australian government under Sir Robert Menzies worked with the Dutch colonial rulers to oppose West Papua’s handover to Indonesia, in the hope of incorporating the province into Australian-controlled PNG. Menzies was finally thwarted by Washington, which wanted to bolster the Indonesian military and therefore agreed to a UN-administered transfer of sovereignty to Jakarta during the 1960s.

Among those advocating the continued integration of Papua into Indonesia is the *Australian’s* foreign editor Greg Sheridan. He has strongly endorsed the government’s determination to repel refugees, declaring it a “key objective” to ensure there is “no ongoing flow of boatpeople from Papua to Australia”. In a column on April 8, he bluntly warned against any support for self-determination. “Outsiders who encourage an independence movement will only be encouraging people to get themselves killed,” he declared.

Others in this camp are advising Canberra to urge Yudhoyono to head off secession by honouring an autonomy package, agreed by former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid with Papuan leaders in 2001. Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on April 11, Lowy Institute analyst Hugh White argued that if the autonomy plan succeeded in quelling Papuan unrest, it would weaken the cause of Australian supporters of Papuan independence. Otherwise, calls by

Australians for self-determination would “poison the political waters in Jakarta” and “provoke a more brutal conflict in Papua”.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian*, however, has also warned that if the unrest and repression in Papua intensify, this autonomy plan “might not be enough, and West Papua may eventually achieve independence.” An editorial insisted that if Jakarta encouraged local militias to harass or kill separatists, “Australia would be forced to shoulder the burden as it did in East Timor, but multiplied many fold”.

Some of the most explicit calls have come from the Australian Greens, who articulate the interests of those sections of the Australian corporate elite that are eying Papua. According to the Greens, “The Australian government should work through the United Nations to have the legitimacy of the ‘Act of Free Choice’ [by which the UN handed Papua to Indonesia in 1969] reviewed and for Papuans to be given a genuine form of self-determination.”

Many of the “lefts” who agitated for a supposedly “humanitarian” military intervention into East Timor in 1999 are making similar calls again. In the Democratic Socialist Party’s *Green Left Weekly*, journalist John Pilger wrote: “If the history of human rights is not the history of great powers’ impunity, the UN must return to West Papua, as it did finally to East Timor.” In reality, as the UN’s facilitation of Australian interests in Timor and its rubberstamping of the illegal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have underlined, the UN itself is nothing but a tool of “great power impunity”.

The true interests of the Papuan masses do not lie in the establishment of an “independent” state in the western half of New Guinea at the behest of, and beholden to, Australian imperialism. Rather they lie in the struggle to develop a unified political movement with the many millions of working people and peasants in Sumatra, Java and throughout the archipelago, against the Indonesian political and military elite and its brutal economic and social agenda.

Such a movement will earn the enmity, not the friendship, of the Australian government and its various apologists. They will all line up behind the Indonesian generals, as they have since 1966. That is why the working people of Papua and throughout Indonesia must turn to the working people of Australia, PNG, New Zealand and throughout the region in the common fight against the profit system itself, the underlying source of the repression meted out to the Papuan people and the attacks being unleashed against the working class around the world.



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