

Tensions between Australia and Indonesia over asylum for Papuan activists

Mike Head
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A diplomatic row has broken out between Indonesia and Australia in the wake of the Howard government's March 23 decision to grant temporary protection visas to 42 asylum seekers and their families from Indonesian Papua.

The refugees arrived by fishing boat on Australia's northern coast in January, and include prominent separatist activists, among them Herman Wangai, his wife Ferra and their two children. In 2002, Wangai was jailed for two and a half years for raising a West Papuan independence flag. By granting the visas, the Australian government has accepted the group's claims that they faced "persecution"—that is, serious threats of death, injury or arbitrary imprisonment by Indonesian authorities.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had personally phoned Prime Minister John Howard to guarantee the safety of the Papuans and call for their repatriation to Indonesia. Following the Australian government's decision to grant them visas, he withdrew Jakarta's ambassador from Canberra "for consultations". Several Indonesian delegations abruptly cancelled trips to Australia, Jakarta halted the signing of an agreement on combatting bird flu, and Howard may be forced to postpone a scheduled trip to Indonesia.

Yudhoyono's spokesman later downplayed the rift, saying Indonesia would not sever diplomatic ties with Australia, despite demands to do so by various politicians. Nevertheless, it is clear that the visa decision has generated concerns in Indonesian ruling circles that Australia could exploit growing unrest in Papua to prepare the ground for another military intervention, like that in East Timor in 1999. The chief security minister, Admiral Widodo Adisutjipto, referred to "speculation about the presence of elements in Australia who support the separatist movement in Papua".

Papua's retention is vital to the Indonesian elite, which fears that, following the secession of Timor, a Western-backed breakaway would fuel secessionist movements in other resource-rich regions of the Indonesian archipelago, including Aceh and the Moluccas. Apart from that, West Papua's natural riches—oil, gas, gold, copper, other minerals and timber—are vast.

Among the major projects is Freeport's Mt Ertsberg mine, the second biggest copper mine in the world, and the largest proven gold deposit, valued in excess of \$US40 billion. It alone generates more than \$1 billion a year in royalties and taxes for the Indonesian authorities. Likewise, the Anglo-Dutch giant Shell has been pumping oil out of West Papua for decades. Now, Atlantic

Richfield Co, a subsidiary of BP Amoco, is developing the world's largest gas field, off the coast of West Papua. In recent years BP has been developing a massive Tangguh gas project at Bintuni Bay, while Petromer Trend and Conoco have produced 300 million barrels of oil from a field at Sele near Sorong, valued at \$4.5 billion.

Anxious to maintain close relations with the Jakarta and the Indonesian military, Howard has been at pains to declare that his government has not changed the longstanding Australian policy of recognising Indonesian sovereignty over Papua. "We do not have any designs on West Papua," he said last weekend. Yet, as Indonesian politicians have objected, the same position existed on East Timor—until 1999.

After decades of backing the 1975 Indonesian annexation of the former Portuguese colony in East Timor, Canberra switched its stance in order to head off renewed Portuguese claims over the half-island and to protect its own grip over the huge oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea. The Howard government claimed to be protecting the Timorese masses—whose suppression by the Indonesian military it had supported for a quarter century—but its intervention resulted in the formation of a tiny impoverished statelet, whose government has been bullied into accepting ongoing Australian control over the lion's share of the Timor Sea fields.

Howard and Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone insisted that the granting of refugee status to the Papuans was a purely administrative act by the immigration department. But the highly sensitive decision to accept the claims of "persecution" was clearly a political one. As an *Australian* editorial observed: "Of course, the visas would never have been granted without the Prime Minister's approval."

When the Papuans first arrived, the Howard government flouted international refugee law by allowing Indonesian authorities to interrogate them. It then shipped them off to detention on Christmas Island, an "excised" offshore Australian territory where they have no rights to apply for visas under Australia's Migration Act. Two months later, however, no doubt after considerable political deliberation, the asylum seekers were granted visas.

Canberra's claims of an impartial process fly in the face of the government's record over the past five years of turning away hundreds of refugees fleeing persecution in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and other oppressed countries. As part of its so-called "Pacific Solution", immigration and military personnel turned back refugees

boats to Indonesia or transported their occupants to remote detention camps on Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. Many of these asylum seekers were forced back to Indonesia, where they remained in poor refugee camps, with Canberra insisting that Indonesia was a "safe" location for refugees.

There is also a long record of Australian governments—both Liberal and Labor—blocking Indonesian refugee claims, both to maintain intimate ties with the Indonesian regime and to prevent a feared "flood" of impoverished and oppressed people seeking a better life in Australia. In the mid-1990s, when East Timorese asylum seekers sought Australia's protection, Prime Minister Paul Keating, a self-declared friend of the dictator General Suharto, declared that they had no right to even apply for visas.

Why then has the Howard government taken this decision? A number of elements appear to be involved.

Domestically, the government has been seeking to distance itself from some of the human tragedies caused by the "Pacific Solution" and the mandatory detention of asylum seekers. Most of the people sent to Nauru eventually were recognised as genuine refugees, some after more than four years of incarceration. Meanwhile, the government's Ombudsman is reviewing more than 200 cases where people, often mentally ill, have been wrongly detained, sometimes for years, in Australia's internal detention camps.

Another factor is that various Christian churches seem to be supporting Papuan protests against the Indonesian military. Last week, a meeting of Papuan church and political leaders called on Yudhoyono to hold an internationally monitored "dialogue" on Papua's future, modelled on talks underway in Aceh, with Australia part of the monitoring team.

The Reverend Socrates Sofyan Yoman, president of Papua's Baptist churches, accused the military of a campaign of violence since clashes with protestors in Jayapura on March 16. He also charged Indonesian authorities with trying to resettle large numbers of "Muslim immigrants" in the territory to inflame religious tensions with Christians. Some church groups in Australia and the US have likewise depicted the Papuan struggle as a religious one, with the province's Christian population being victimised by an Islamic government.

The Howard government has always courted a Christian fundamentalist constituency and in recent months has stepped up its anti-Muslim agitation with Howard denouncing protests against the anti-Islamic cartoons in Europe and his treasurer Peter Costello demanding that Muslims in Australia accept "Australian values or leave". This campaign is to help justify extending Australian involvement in Washington's predatory wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as divert growing social tensions at home into reactionary communal channels.

Strategically, Canberra has used its participation in the US-led invasions to assert its hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region, sending troops to the Solomon Islands, and police and officials to Papua New Guinea (PNG), Fiji and Vanuatu. The Papuan refugee decision serves to increase Australian leverage over the region.

Howard has expressed the hope that the "difficult issue" of Papua "will not disturb the close friendship between the governments of the two countries". At the same time, as was the

case in East Timor, Canberra may be concerned that political instability in Papua could open the door for the ex-colonial power, in this case the Netherlands, to revive its claims over the territory.

Last November a report commissioned by the Dutch government called into question the legitimacy of Indonesia's rule, describing as a "sham" the 1969 UN-administered "Act of Free Choice" by which hand-picked tribal chiefs voted for incorporation into Indonesia. By contrast, the report, published by the Institute of Netherlands History in The Hague, described the Dutch-sponsored formation of a West New Guinea Council and raising of a "Morning Star" national flag in December 1961 as the "unmistakable beginning of the formation of a Papuan state".

The report also noted that an agreement had been signed with the Menzies government in Australia in 1957 allowing for a possible union of West Papua and neighbouring Australian-controlled Papua New Guinea on the basis of "ethnological and geographical affinity". These colonial ambitions were dashed, however. In response to the 1961 declaration of "Papuan independence", Indonesian troops took over the territory, commanded by General Suharto, and the US ultimately backed Indonesia to take control of Papua.

There is no suggestion yet of any fundamental shift in the underlying US and Australian orientation, which today means continued support for Yudhoyono, himself a former Suharto-era general, and Indonesian sovereignty over Papua. Nevertheless, there are indications that sections of the Australian media and political elite are re-opening the issue of Papua.

While insisting that it was not making a "pro-independence argument", a Melbourne *Age* editorial welcomed the Papuan visa decision and said: "It would be equally neighbourly of Australia to do its best to persuade Indonesia that a political settlement in West Papua is in everyone's interest. Some international mediation will probably be needed to rebuild trust and dialogue between Jakarta and the Papuans."



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