

Growing unrest in Indonesian Papua

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There are increasing signs of instability in Indonesian Papua, fuelled by Jakarta's reneging on promises of provincial autonomy and heavy-handed military repression against political opposition.

In the latest incident, the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) reported that four people died in an armed clash on April 10 between security forces and a pro-separatist group. About 30 armed men attacked soldiers in a village about 70 kilometres from the provincial capital of Jayapura. Two soldiers and two attackers were killed.

Last month, five police were killed in a violent confrontation as they were seeking to break up a student-led blockade at Abepura on the road between Jayapura, the Papuan capital, and the airport. The protesters were demanding the closure of the giant Freeport gold and copper mine. The first day—March 15—passed without incident. The following day, however, security forces, including the notorious anti-riot Brimob, arrested the demonstration leader and attempted to break up the blockade with tear gas and batons. Four police died in the clash and a fifth died on March 22. At least 24 civilians were hospitalised, including five with gunshot wounds.

A report produced by the Brussels-based thinktank, the International Crisis Group (ICG), explained: "In the days after the riot, police conducted sweeps of student dormitories, reportedly beating civilians and firing shots into the air. Stray bullets wounded two women and a 10-year-old girl. Police took over 70 people for questioning and so far arrested 15, but much about the Abepura riot remains unclear." Journalists and human rights groups have been prevented by the police from interviewing victims.

The Brimob commander was stood down shortly after the protest, not for his heavy handed methods, but the deaths of the soldiers. Effectively excusing the crackdown, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang

Yudhoyono said he "understands how members of the Mobile Brigade feel about the deaths of their colleagues".

The Abepura clash followed nearly a month of protests against Freeport, starting with a four-day blockade of the mine near Timika in late February. The initial dispute erupted after local villagers were prevented from eking gold out of the tailings from the mine—something they had been doing "illegally" for years. The blockade closed the Freeport mine for the first time in years, triggering other protests in Jakarta and Jayapura.

The Freeport mine has been a focal point for local Papuan anger for three decades. Environmental destruction and the company's connections with the Jakarta establishment and the military make the mine a concrete manifestation of many of the problems facing the Papuan people.

While huge profits are made by the mine owners and the Jakarta government receives over \$US1 billion annually in royalties, Papua is among the most economically backward provinces in Indonesia. A 2005 World Bank report revealed 40 percent of Papuans live in poverty, which is more than twice the national average. Papuans have the poorest education and health care in Indonesia. Between 1999 and 2002, the HIV/AIDS infection rate increased from under 7 percent to more 16 percent.

The Papuan elite has long directed local resentment over the living standards and Indonesian repression into separatism. The fall of the Suharto regime in 1998 brought a fresh round of demands for Papuan independence, which was further fuelled by the Australian-led military intervention in East Timor in 1999.

Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid sought to head off demands for independence in Papua, as well as Aceh, by enacting a Special Autonomy Law in 2001.

The legislation gave a greater share of the revenue from projects such as Freeport to the provincial authorities and made concessions on other grievances.

The autonomy law included a proposal for the formation of a Papuan Peoples Council (MRP) to placate local concerns over the undermining of the indigenous culture by large scale immigration from other parts of Indonesia. Wahid also indicated that he would overturn a law enacted previously to divide Papua into three separate provinces—West Irian Jaya, Central Irian Jaya, and Irian Jaya—as a means of undermining Papuan solidarity.

Wahid's overtures to the Papuan and Achnese elites produced sharp divisions in Jakarta. The TNI in particular relies heavily on income obtained through various business activities, legal and illegal, in these resource-rich provinces. Accusations that Wahid was undermining Indonesia were at the centre of protracted moves to impeach him in 2001 and install Megawati Sukarnoputri as president.

Under Megawati, the TNI rapidly moved to crush separatist sentiment in the two provinces. In November 2001, Papuan leader Theys Eluay was brazenly abducted and murdered by Indonesia's Kopassus special forces. Moves towards autonomy were emasculated and Megawati revived the plan to carve the province into three. West Irian Jaya was formed in 2003.

During his election campaign in 2004, Yudhoyono, a former Suharto-era general, promised to resolve conflicts in Papua and Aceh peacefully. Having won the presidency, however, he has done nothing to reverse the course set by Megawati: to make no significant concessions to the Papuan elites and to crush any popular opposition in the province.

As a result, when it was finally formed last October, the MRP, on which local leaders had pinned their hopes, was given few powers. Moreover, its status has been undermined by ongoing disputes with new "provincial leaders" in West Irian Jaya, which the MRP has refused to recognise. In the midst of negotiations between the MRP and Jakarta, the central government suddenly authorised gubernatorial elections for West Irian Jaya, which eventually went ahead in March 2006.

Jakarta has attempted to establish a base of support in West Irian Jaya, by encouraging particular tribal leaders and holding out the prospect of substantial revenue

from a major BP liquid natural gas plant in the province. Its divide and rule tactics have further undermined the autonomy law and any Papuan support. After the March 15-16 protest, MRP chairman Agus Alue Alua declared: "Papua's trust to Jakarta comes to zero."

Commenting on the protests, the president of Papua's Baptist churches, Reverend Socrates Sofyan Yoman, told the media: "The root problem is political status. Special Autonomy has failed; it brings more suffering. The best way is self determination for Papua's future." His comments reflect growing sentiment among the Papuan elites for renewed agitation for independence.

A group of 42 Papuan refugees led by separatist leader Herman Wainggai were granted temporary protection visas by the Australian government last month. As Wainggai explained to *Time* magazine, he decided to head for Australia in a bid to gain international attention—that is, the backing of the major powers for an independent Papua. Like East Timor, a Papuan statelet would be completely dependent—economically, politically and militarily—on its international backers.

The hostile response of the Yudhoyono administration to Canberra's decision reflects concerns in Jakarta of another Australian "humanitarian" intervention, this time in Papua. With opposition to Indonesian rule growing in Papua, there are signs that Jakarta is preparing for a ruthless crackdown.

The TNI already has a substantial presence in Papua, including at the Freeport mine, which is deemed to be a "vital strategic asset". In April 2005, Jakarta announced an additional 15,000 troops were to be deployed in Papua. There have been a number of reports of the TNI forming militia groups to intimidate and repress pro-independence supporters.



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