

Indonesian government dismisses evidence of torture in Papua

John Roberts
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On the eve of a visit to Indonesia by US President Barack Obama, scheduled for Tuesday and Wednesday, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and the country's military attempted to counter international media coverage and human rights group protests over a video that shows the barbaric treatment of two Papuans.

The video was shot in May, apparently on the phone camera of Indonesian security personnel. It was published on YouTube on October 17. The video shows the torture of two men, Tunaliwor Kiwo and Telangga Gire. The incident occurred in the Puncak Yaya region of West Papua, one of the two provinces into which the resource-rich Indonesian territory of Papua is divided. It is an area where Indonesian security forces believe there is widespread support for Papuan separatism.

The clip shows armed men in plain clothes speaking in Indonesian, accusing the two men of being separatist fighters and demanding information about weapons. Kiwo has his genitals burned and Gire has a knife put to his face. He is told his throat will be cut.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on November 5 that an interview with Kiwo was filmed by Markus Haluk of the Papuan Customary Council in October. Kiwo, who is now in hiding, claimed that the May video shows only a small part of two days of torture and interrogation that the two men endured.

The authenticity of the May video was confirmed when government officials admitted knowledge of the Kiwo case. Yudhoyono himself promised an investigation.

On November 5, four Indonesian soldiers were reportedly brought before a military tribunal in Jayapura, the capital of Papua province. In what was described in the *Jakarta Post* as a "red herring", the impression was given by the military that the men were

accused of involvement in the May incident.

It soon became clear that the soldiers were actually accused of another case of abuse on March 17. They had filmed as many as 30 villagers in Gurage being beaten to reveal the whereabouts of suspected separatist Davis Tabuni. The incident was less horrific than the torture of Kiwo and Gire, but it points to the extent of the violence and intimidation carried out by the Indonesian military against the Melanesian population of Papua.

The deputy director of the Asia division of the US-based Human Rights Watch, Phil Robertson, condemned the court martial, which was closed to the media, as a farce. He said Indonesia's "opaque" military court system often operates behind closed doors and "rarely dispenses justice" to victims of abuse by soldiers. "How many more videos of torture need to come out of Papua before the administration and the international community realise there is a systematic human rights problem of security force abuses in Papua that needs to be addressed? This should be at the top of the agenda when President Obama visits Jakarta next week."

A report published by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) in August entitled "The Deepening Impasse in Papua" points to some of the sources of discontent in Papua. It concluded that the "special autonomy" granted by the Indonesian government had not given the Papuan population any political influence over major decisions, which were still made in Jakarta.

Tensions between indigenous Melanesians and Indonesian officials, police and immigrants from other parts of Indonesia are deepening. Cash payments are being made to the smaller administrative units into which Papua is being divided. But these handouts, and

other economic concessions in the impoverished territory, have failed to resolve the problems caused by Jakarta's indifference to the local discontent over the political disenfranchisement.

In June, the Papuan Peoples Council (MRP), a body set up under Jakarta's autonomy laws, invited 200 people to discuss Jakarta's rejection of demands for political changes. More than 600 people turned up and, to the concern of the MRP, demanded a rejection of autonomy and called for an internationally mediated dialogue and a referendum on independence.

The repression has continued. In June, Human Rights Watch published a report "Prosecuting Political Aspiration: Indonesia's Political Prisoners". The report examined the cases of 10 prominent Papuan and Moluccan activists currently imprisoned. Most were jailed under articles 106 and 110 of the Criminal Code for rebellion or treason and most have received stiff sentences. Some have been mistreated in prison or in pre-trial detention. The men were arrested for organising rallies during which independence flags were raised.

There is little chance, however, that Obama will even make a token reference to the issue of human rights. His visit is part of the US administration's aggressive drive to shore up its allies in Asia against China's growing economic and political influence. Indonesia, the most populous country in South East Asia, is viewed as critical to this perspective.

Even before the establishment of the Suharto military dictatorship in a bloody CIA-backed coup in 1965-66, the US defended Indonesian claims over Papua. Washington maintains the closest relations with the Indonesian security forces, including through the International Military Education and Training Program and the Anti-Terror Assistance Program. In July, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates announced that the US would lift a 12-year ban on contacts with Indonesia's notorious Kopassus special forces, imposed after atrocities in East Timor. Gates said the human rights issues had been "addressed".

During her visit to Jakarta on November 2, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard avoided any reference to the Indonesian military's abuses. The Indonesian president had publicly warned her not to say anything about the controversy over the May video. Yudhoyono, a Suharto-era general, said: "About three days ago I

read in *Kompas* a story that Australia is requested (by human rights NGOs) to pressure Indonesia ... to carry out an investigation. I say it here that pressure is not necessary, pressure by any country or from any NGO, it is not necessary." Yudhoyono had earlier promised an inquiry but added that Indonesia had the right to suppress separatism in Papua with the use of force.

Successive Australian governments have maintained the closest ties with Jakarta. Former prime minister Paul Keating boasted of his relationship with the dictator Suharto. Keating twice claimed that Suharto's military coup, which cost the lives of at least half a million people, was the greatest contribution to stability in South East Asia. The Australian military maintains close ties with its Indonesian counterparts. In September, Australian special forces took part in a joint exercise with Kopassus in Bali.



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