

# Sharp tensions in Indonesian Papua following failure of “peace conference”

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A report by the Brussels-based think tank, the International Crisis Group (ICG), has shed some light on the sharp ongoing tensions within the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua. The Indonesian armed forces, which have a heavy presence to suppress political opposition and separatist Free Papua Movement (OPM) guerrillas, maintain a tight control over the media.

The August 22 report entitled “Indonesia: Hope and Hard Reality in Papua” focussed on the events surrounding a so-called peace conference held in Abepura near the Papuan capital of Jayapura on July 5-7. Organised by the Papua Peace Network, it was attended by some 800 delegates, with twice the number of Melanesian Papuans than expected by organisers. Jakarta was represented by a high-level delegation led by the co-ordinating minister for political and security affairs, Djoko Suyanto, who is one of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s top ministers.

According to the ICG, the organisers aimed to use the conference to facilitate dialogue with the Indonesian government, “in a way that some thought might keep the “M” word—*merdeka* (independence) at bay.” Indonesian officials offered informal “constructive communication,” but matters quickly got out of hand. Various Papuan representatives called for formal dialogue with an international mediator—along the lines of talks held in Aceh with the separatist GAM (Free Aceh Movement) leadership that, in the wake of the devastating 2004 tsunami, led to an autonomy settlement. “Instead of building bridges, the conference underscored the depth of the gulf in perceptions between Jakarta-based officials and Papuan civil society about the nature of the conflict,” the report

stated.

At this stage, Yudhoyono, who as coordinating security minister under President Megawati Sukarnoputri launched a military offensive against GAM in 2002, has expressed no interest in formal peace negotiations. As the ICG noted, no action has been taken on a proposal to set up a “Unit for the Acceleration of Development in Papua and West Papua” to establish “quick win” development projects. The two provinces are among the most economically backward and impoverished in Indonesia, despite having significant natural resources, including the massive Freeport gold and copper mine.

The lack of any agreement at the conference between Jakarta and various Papuan organisations was quickly underscored by a spate of violence and protest rallies in the provincial capital Jayapura and other towns on August 2, demanding a referendum on independence for the Papuan provinces. The demonstrations were organised by the West Papua National Committee, which had refused to take part in the Abepura meeting.

According to the international media, more than 10,000 people participated in the rallies in Papua, with the largest in Jayapura. The West Papua Advocacy Team reported a heavy police presence at the rallies, with members of the army’s notorious Kopassus special forces in plain clothes and thugs from two Jakarta-backed militias among the crowds in Jayapura.

On the day before the protests, three civilians and a soldier were killed and nine wounded in a night-time attack in the village of Nafri, near Jayapura. The three civilians were so-called transmigrants from non-

Melanesian parts of Indonesia. Local OPM leader Lambert Pekikir denied any involvement and accused the military of staging a provocation. Whether that was the case or not, the army has in the past exploited such incidents to justify repression.

The previous day, 19 people were killed in clashes between rival Papuan groups in the central highlands area of Puncak Jaya. According to police, the conflict erupted over competing candidates in an election for district chief scheduled for November 9. Central Highlands Papuan Student Association general secretary Markus Haluk accused the police of exacerbating the violence by firing into the crowd and killing three people.

The Puncak Jaya district is one of the poorest districts in the Papuan provinces—along with five others it is categorised by the Home Affairs Ministry as “failed.” There is no road from Jayapura to the district capital of Mulia. The ICG report paints a picture of endemic corruption and a lack of administration and basic services. The district is one of the strongholds of the OPM, which carries out sporadic ambushes of soldiers. According to estimates cited by the ICG, the combined strength of all OPM factions in the district is about 200 fighters armed with some 30 guns.

The heavily-armed military, with an estimated 15,000 personnel in Papua, maintains a reign of terror against the local population. “The pattern of OPM ambushes followed by counter-insurgency operations by police, military or joint forces has taken its toll on the population,” the ICG report states, “in the form of frequent ‘sweepings’ (searches for perpetrators) and serious human rights violations, deepening local resentment. Gratuitous abuse is more common than the security forces will admit and it goes largely unpunished.”

Last year, a video posted on YouTube, showing the torture of two men from the district by Indonesian soldiers, created a furore (see: “Indonesian government dismisses evidence of torture in Papua”). The men had knives held to their throats and lighted cigarettes applied to their genitals. The soldiers were eventually convicted, but received what amounted to a slap on the

wrist—prison terms of between eight to ten months with time off for time served.

Articles in the Australian-based *Age* newspaper last month, based on leaked Kopassus documents from 2006 to 2009, revealed massive spying and surveillance operations in Papua not only against anyone suspected of harbouring separatist sentiments but those critical of the heavy-handed rule of the army in the provinces.

The army, which is routinely accused of running illegal logging, protection and other rackets in Papua, clearly has its own agenda. As the *Age* explained, Kopassus sought to discredit the institutions and arrangements established under the special autonomy deal given to the province in 2001. The limited powers given to Papuans would undermine the military’s own authority in the region.

Shortly after last month’s rallies, the military announced another crackdown. Speaking on August 4, army chief General Pramono Edhie Wibowo promised that the OPM rebels would be “chased down” and “cleaned up” by local military units. He was responding to an incident that allegedly involved OPM fighters firing on an army helicopter the previous day.

The involvement of top-level government ministers and officials in the so-called peace conference in Papua was no doubt with a view to giving a “democratic” face-lift to the Yudhoyono administration before the visit of US President Barack Obama in November.

Obama, however, has already strengthened ties with Indonesia and will continue to do so regardless of the government’s anti-democratic practices—as part of Washington’s broader efforts to undermine Chinese influence in South East Asia. Last year, the Obama administration ended a decade-long ban on US military contact with the Kopassus special forces, which are central to the ongoing repression in Papua.



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