

Australian PM dismisses Indonesian human rights abuses

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In a chilling response to a protest on Sunday by three West Papuan students at the Australian consulate in Bali, Prime Minister Tony Abbott warned yesterday that his government would not allow anyone to “grandstand” against Indonesia.

The students—Rofinus Yanggam, Markus Jerewon and Yuvensius Goo—climbed over the consulate walls in the early hours of Sunday to highlight the ongoing abuse of basic democratic rights in the Indonesian province of Papua. They said they were forced to leave after the Australian consul-general, Brett Farmer, threatened to call in the Indonesian police to arrest them.

The three presented a letter to consulate staff, urging Abbott and other international leaders gathered in Bali for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit to call on Indonesian authorities to free Papuan political prisoners and allow access to the province by journalists, diplomats and observers.

Abbott claimed the students left of their own accord, then declared: “We have a very strong relationship with Indonesia and we are not going to give a platform to grandstand against Indonesia... Please, don’t look to do it in Australia. You are not welcome.”

An Indonesian activist, who offered legal advice by phone to the students in the consulate, confirmed that Australian officials threatened them. He told the Fairfax press: “Suddenly I heard an Australian voice saying: ‘You cannot stay here. You have to leave.’ And then: ‘We will call the police.’ It was pretty harsh.”

Abbott’s comments reek of contempt for democratic rights and are a clear warning that his government will take whatever measures it deems necessary to protect relations with Indonesia. Although consular staff denied the fact, the students sought “refuge.” If arrested by Indonesian police, they face jail and physical abuse.

In the lead-up to the APEC summit, police repeatedly raided Papuan student accommodation in Bali in an attempt to prevent protests. Asked about the raids, Lieutenant General Lodewijk Freidrich Paulus, in charge of APEC security, told the *Jakarta Post*: “If your house is about to receive guests, then it is obvious to sweep the floor of your house and do some cleaning to please your guest. Right?”

Abbott publicly defended the Indonesian government’s record of human rights abuses, declaring: “The situation in West Papua is getting better, not worse. I want to acknowledge the work [Indonesian] President [Susilo Bambang] Yudhoyono has done to provide greater autonomy, a better level of government services and ultimately a better life for the people of West Papua.”

In fact, the systematic repression of the indigenous Melanesian population of Papua that occurred under the Suharto junta has continued unabated since the dictator’s fall in 1998. Yudhoyono, a former Suharto-era general, has presided over security in West Papua both as president since 2004 and as a top security minister under the previous president, Megawati Sukarnoputri.

A study cited by the *Sydney Morning Herald* yesterday found that most of the 431 cases of torture between 1963—when Indonesia took control of West Papua—and 2010 involved “innocent civilians” targeted as part of a “policy of terror.” The researcher, Budi Hernawan, worked for the Catholic Commission for Peace and Justice in the provincial capital of Jayapura for more than a decade. The torture included beating, kicking, burning, stabbing, shooting, rape and starvation by soldiers.

Such practices received widespread international coverage in 2010 when a mobile phone video showed

two men, Tunaliwor Kiwo and Telangga Gire, being interrogated by Indonesian troops, one threatened with a knife at his throat and the other with a burning stick placed on his genitals. While Yudhoyono promised a full inquiry, three low-ranking soldiers were made scapegoats and sentenced to less than a year's jail.

The *Guardian* reported on September 25 that Indonesia's notorious police mobile brigade (Brimob) shot and killed a young villager, Alpius Mote, in a "sweep" operation through a market in the remote village of Waghete. According to Santon Tekege, a Catholic brother, the police targeted young men with long hair and beards, allegedly a symbol of supporters of West Papuan separatism. Two others were injured in the shooting.

The Indonesian government's determination to stamp out any support for the long-running separatist Free Papua Movement (OPM) is bound up with its economic reliance on the province's natural resources, particularly the huge Freeport gold and copper mine. It also fears that separatist activities in West Papua could rekindle similar movements in other parts of the disparate Indonesian archipelago, such as Aceh and the Moluccas.

Abbott's comments on Sunday's consulate protest were designed to assuage continuing concerns in Indonesian ruling circles that Canberra could exploit separatist sentiment in West Papua to engineer the creation of dependent mini-state, as it did in East Timor. In 1999, amid the political turmoil that followed Suharto's fall, the Howard government used the violence of pro-Indonesian thugs to justify Australian military intervention, in a bid to secure Australian control over lucrative oil and gas reserves in the adjacent Timor Sea.

Abbott highlighted the economic and strategic importance of Indonesia to Australian imperialism by making his first trip abroad as prime minister to Jakarta late last month, accompanied by a contingent of business leaders. Abbott sought to strengthen trade and commercial links, while trying to secure Indonesian support for his government's reactionary "border protection" policy, including the use of the Australian warships to turn back refugee boats to Indonesia.

The policy fuelled objections by Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa that such measures could violate Indonesian national sovereignty. Indonesia's

concern is not for the right of refugees to seek asylum, but rather the growing presence of Australian warships and warplanes in the waters between the two countries.

The Abbott government, like the previous Labor government, is committed to the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia, which is aimed at undermining China's economic and strategic position throughout the region. Jakarta, which is attempting to balance between Washington and Beijing, is worried about the potential dangers posed by the build-up of US and Australian military forces adjacent to key strategic waterways in Indonesia.

During his visit last month, Abbott reassured Yudhoyono that his government would respect Indonesian sovereignty and implement its anti-refugee policy in collaboration with Jakarta. To underscore the point, just days before his visit, the Australian government illegally deported a group of seven West Papuan refugees, who had arrived in Australia's Torres Strait Islands, to neighbouring Papua New Guinea. Likewise, the expulsion of protestors from the Australian consulate on Sunday sought to assure Jakarta that Australian imperialism had no designs on West Papua.



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