

“Hostage” incident highlights political tensions in Indonesian Papua

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A standoff between Indonesian security forces and a separatist group around two villages close to the giant US-run Freeport Grasberg gold and copper mine in the central highlands, points to deep tensions developing in Indonesian Papua.

The police and Indonesian military confronted the West Papua Liberation Army (TPN) from November 5 to 16 in the villages of Kimbely and Banti, threatening to trigger an armed clash. In the end, the TPN withdrew without a firefight. The security forces claimed the villagers were being held as hostages in order to hinder the mine’s operations.

With the incident over, 344 of the 1,300 villagers left with the military. The aim of the TPN, which is connected to the separatist Free Papua Movement (OPM), appears to have been to intimidate villagers who were not indigenous Melanesian Papuans.

Many of those who left were impoverished migrant workers from South Sulawesi. Yohanis Batto told the media they were not physically harmed by the TPN but were “traumatised.” He said they would move to the coastal town of Timika, the logistical base of the Freeport operation.

Increased violence in the Papuan highlands has included the ambush and murder of four road construction workers in March and the killing of two police since August—all claimed by the TPN.

The tensions are linked to the drive by Indonesian President Joko Widodo’s administration to complete the long-delayed Trans Papua Highway before the 2019 national elections. The road is part of a massive infrastructure plan to open up the provinces of Papua and West Papua economically as Widodo seeks to make Indonesia a greater regional and global player.

Until recently, most internal migrants in the Papuan provinces, mainly from Java and South Sulawesi,

settled in the Papuan capital Jayapura, or in towns along the coast and around Timika. The highlands remain largely Melanesian, but the new highway will change this.

The 4,325-kilometre road snakes through mountainous country from Soring in the Bird’s Head region and across the central highlands along the Papua New Guinea border to Merauke on the southeastern coast. A 450-kilometre section will link Wamena, the political centre of the highlands, to the new highway.

In August, a group of Papuan leaders and the Papuan Peace Network warned Widodo of a social explosion if the highlands population were left as “spectators” to economic growth.

Sidney Jones of the Jakarta-based think tank, the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), warned that an influx of migrants would rally support behind the Wamena-based West Papua National Committee (KNPB).

Since its banning last year, support has grown for the KNPB and raised its profile in the separatist camp. It works in collaboration with the overseas-based United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP), which promotes Papuan self-determination in international bodies.

Widodo has visited the Papuan provinces five times since his 2014 election. He has made various promises, including that the economic development promoted by Jakarta would improve the lot of indigenous Papuans and poor immigrants alike.

In reality, according to the World Bank, 80 percent of all Indonesians are worse off than 20 years ago when the Suharto dictatorship collapsed in 1998. In that time, the country’s economy has grown fivefold but the richest 1 percent have come to control 50 percent of national wealth and the top 10 percent consume as

much as the bottom 54 percent.

In Papua, the vast natural resources have benefitted only a tiny layer of the local elites, along with major international corporations and associated Indonesian businesses. Widodo's drive for economic development will exacerbate the social divide.

Successive governments have responded to social tensions in Papua by stirring up animosities between locals and internal immigrants, and conducting brutal crackdowns on any social and political unrest. Papuan separatist leaders have exploited local anger to try to pressure Jakarta for concessions and a greater slice of the economic pie for the small indigenous elites.

Widodo has sought to defuse mounting local resentment and anger by promising to deal with human rights abuses by the police and military against Melanesian Papuans. Like his predecessors, however, Widodo will not hesitate to crack down on political opposition and social unrest. Moreover, the new highway will provide the military with far easier access to the region's mountainous interior.

Indonesian control over the former Dutch colony was formally recognised by the UN after the United States assisted the Suharto dictatorship to organise a fraudulent plebiscite of Papuan tribal chiefs in 1969.

Today, about half of the estimated 3.6 million people in Indonesia's two Papuan provinces are migrants and their descendants, creating sharp tensions over land, jobs and essential services.

The separatist politics of the Papuan elites play directly into the hands of Jakarta by allowing it to divide workers from subsistence farmers on the basis of ethnicity, language and culture. Papuan leaders are not concerned about the plight of working people but in feathering their own nests.

A case in point is the dispute over the benefits from Jakarta's efforts to have Freeport divest 51 percent of the shares in the Grasberg mine to the Indonesian government. Papuan governor Lukas Enembe, a highlander, demanded 20 percent go to Papua. In October, a deal was struck with the central government for a 10 percent stake.

An IPAC report on October 31 described Enembe as "the unquestioned political boss of Papua" and noted that anyone who opposed his preferred candidates for district heads did so "at their peril." The *Jakarta Post* reported on October 11 that Enembe had said the

provincial administration would be the "one door" through which the divestment would be discussed with Jakarta.

The political starting point for any struggle to address social and democratic rights in Papua and right across the Indonesian archipelago is a rejection of all internecine, ethnic-based rivalry and the unity of all workers, young people and villagers against the corrupt ruling elites on the basis of a socialist perspective.



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