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West Papua -A conflict ignored by Australia

The name “West Papua” is used to refer to the whole of the western half of the Island of New Guinea, the former Dutch colony of Netherlands New Guinea. However, “West Papua” at this time is divided into two provinces, Papua and West Papua.

West Papua should be a priority foreign policy issue for Australia.

West Papua is one of our nearest neighbours and the situation in the territory continues to deteriorate with ongoing clashes between the security forces and the OPM (the Free Papua Movement). The West Papuan people continue to be arrested, intimidated and killed by the security forces. A number of military operations have also taken place in the past few years. During these operations houses are burned, livestock killed, leaving local people traumatised and in fear for the lives.

An article in the Jakarta Post (3 April 2019) “Military operations in Nduga violate human rights: Report <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/04/03/military-operations-in-nduga-violate-human-rights-report.html>

The military operations have also created large numbers of internal refugees.

Extract from a report by the International Coalition for Papua (July 2020).

“Numerous cases of internal displacement due to security force operations in West Papua were reported from the regencies of Mimika, Intan Jaya, Puncak, Lanny Jaya, and Nduga between 2019 and April 2020. These operations against the West Papua National Liberation Army (TPN PB) began on 4 December 2018 in Nduga in response to the killing of 19 government contractors and resulted in further armed clashes. Data collected by the ICP show that more than 41,851 indigenous Papuans from these five regencies were internally displaced between 2019 and April 2020. In 2019, 214 of these Papuans reportedly died as a result of sickness, malnutrition, exhaustion, and hypothermia. The COVID-19 outbreak in the region has aggravated this humanitarian crisis. The authorities in West Papua are now expected to impose even greater restrictions on the freedom of movement and freedom of assembly, and it is likely that hospitals, which already lag far behind national care standards, and medical personnel will not be able to cope with the rising number of patients.”

Full report

https://www.humanrightspapua.org/images/docs/HumanitarianCrisisWestPapua_IDP_Covid_July2020.pdf

It is now 58 years since Indonesia took over the administration of West Papua from the UN in 1963 and the West Papuan people are still marching in the streets risking arrest and torture and calling for their right to self-determination. Australia and the international community should realize that West Papua is an issue that is not going away (no matter how much they wished it would) and it is in their interest to try and help solve the many issues of concern in West Papua. Otherwise, we could see increasing conflict in the territory which in turn could affect the region.

I will not go into any great detail about the history of West Papua. However, ever since Indonesia took over responsibility for the administration of the territory the West Papuan people have suffered on going human rights abuses committed by the Indonesian security forces. The so called "Act of free Choice "in 1969 was a farce and has never been accepted by the West Papuan people, which is why today the West Papuan people are still marching in the streets calling for a real referendum.

Unless one follows the issue of West Papua, incidents which show how easily the situation in West Papua can rapidly deteriorate into violence against the Papuan people can be easily missed.

It's rare that stories about West Papua go viral in the mainstream media but the mass demonstrations that occurred in August and September 2019 certainly did. The rallies were triggered by the arrest of 43 West Papuan students in Surabaya Indonesia on the 17 August, Indonesia Independence Day. The incident occurred because it had been reported that an Indonesian flag had been vandalised near a student hostel for Papuans. (It's not unusual for Papuans to further their education in Indonesia.) in this case Surabaya. Nationalists groups believed that the Papuan students had vandialised the flag and that the students were refusing to take part in Indonesian Independence celebrations. The Jakarta Post (19 August) reported that security personnel and members of Indonesian Nationalist groups attacked the Papuan students throwing stones at the dormitory and chanting "Kick out the Papuans!" and "Slaughter the Papuans!" The mob also called the students monkeys, pigs and dogs. As they stormed the building the Police fired tear gas into the building and arrested the students. The students were later released after questioning. They had denied any knowledge of the damaged flag.

Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in anti-racism rallies in all the major cities and towns not only in West Papua but also Indonesia. They were not only showing solidarity with the arrested students but also protesting against the racial abuse, both verbal and physical that occurred during the arrests.

Again, on the 23 September hundreds of students took to the streets in Wamena to protest that a teacher had insulted a Papua student. A large part of Wamena was destroyed during the demonstrations (one report said up to 350 shops and 27 houses were destroyed). Wamena's Airport, which can have up to 120 flights a day was temporarily closed. During the demonstrations the government also restricted internet access to Wamena.

It's also of great concern that Indonesian militia groups were involved in the demonstrations. The Militia groups have been trained by the Indonesia security forces to intimidate and attack West Papuans. (Shades of East Timor)

Tapol, the human rights organisation based in the UK released a report on the first anniversary of what became known as the "West Papua Uprising".
<https://www.tapol.org/sites/default/files/The%202019%20West%20Papua%20Uprising.pdf>

Our Foreign Minister is very selective in which countries she criticizes over their human rights record. No problem raising concerns about China over Hong Kong or its treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim peoples in Xinjiang. But Canberra seems to have great difficulty raising the human rights abuses in West Papua with Jakarta. It should also be remembered that Australia is involved in the conflict. We help train and aid the Indonesia military.

"Australia trained Indonesian police officer accused of West Papua violence"

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/03/australia-trained-indonesian-police-officer-accused-of-west-papua-violence>

If Canberra ignores the situation in West Papua, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet does not.

"I have been disturbed by escalating violence in the past two weeks in the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua, and especially the deaths of some protestors and security forces personnel. This is part of a trend we have observed since December 2018, and we have been discussing our concerns with the Indonesian authorities. There should be no place for such violence in a democratic and diverse Indonesia, and I encourage the authorities to engage in dialogue with the people of Papua and West Papua on their aspirations and concerns, as well as to restore internet services and refrain from any excessive use of force. Blanket internet shutdowns are likely to contravene freedom of expression and limiting communications may exacerbate tensions". <https://reliefweb.int/report/indonesia/comment-un-high-commissioner-human-rights-michelle-bachelet-indonesia-papua-and>

Progress in the region

There is an increase in awareness of the issue around the world and particularly in our region. The Pacific countries regularly raise the issue of West Papua at the UN general assembly in New York. West Papua is on the agenda of the two main regional organisations in the Pacific. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG),

Pacific Support for West Papua Raises Concerns in Jakarta

The continuing support for West Papua by Pacific countries has raised concerns in Jakarta which is a relatively new actor in the Pacific region. To counter the growing support for West Papua, Indonesia is attempting to strengthen its ties with South Pacific countries. Indonesia has sent delegations to strengthen bilateral relations with a number of countries and has offered various aid packages in an attempt to influence the Pacific leaders not to support West Papua or raise the issue at the UN.

Australia is a member of the PIF and usually tries to keep WP off the agenda. Indonesia was angry that West Papua was put on the agenda of the 50th Pacific Islands Forum in Tuvalu. Not a single Pacific Islands country opposed the inclusion of West Papua on the agenda other than Australia. Guardian article dated 12 August 2019.

Can the conflict in West Papua affect the region?

The whole of the island of New Guinea will always be important strategically to Australia and Canberra has always preferred a stable region to our north. However, if the situation in West Papua continues to deteriorate, support for West Papua by the Pacific countries could affect our relations with the region. China's growing influence in the region is causing concern in Canberra but not all Pacific countries see China's aid in a negative light.

A Russian point of view

The following is a small extract from an article in the Russian journal "International Affairs"

"From a pragmatic standpoint, experts point out that the problem of West Papua can't be solved any time soon, since it is too big and necessitates a radical review of both the political and economic agenda, which is something no one is now ready for. The only ones that the West Papuans' desire for independence can possibly resonate with are those who want to change the current balance of power in the Pacific region."

<https://en.interaffairs.ru/article/indonesia-papua-new-guinea-and-australia-amid-the-rising-tide-of-secessionism-in-the-region/>

In light of the ongoing human rights abuses in West Papua the Australian Government should re-think its policy of ties with the Indonesian military and continue to raise concern about the human rights situation in the territory.