

Indonesia's Hard Line Strengthens Secessionists in West Papua

By Jim Lobe

Increasing repression by government forces is strengthening independence sentiment in Indonesia's easternmost province of West Papua, also known as Irian Jaya.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that conciliatory policies toward the Papuans, including substantial autonomy promised by impeached President Abdurrahman Wahid, have not been translated into reality on the ground.

On the contrary, growing human rights abuses by security forces, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and lethal force against peaceful demonstrators, are provoking an increasingly violent response from armed Papuan groups.

These groups have stepped up attacks on security posts and in June kidnapped two Belgian filmmakers in an apparent bid to draw greater international attention to their struggle. Particularly ominous, Papuan militants have launched a growing number of attacks against Indonesian migrants from other provinces.

The violence in the mineral-rich territory remains less intense than in Aceh, at the northern tip of the island of Sumatra. But the government in Jakarta regards both West Papua and Aceh as the front line in its effort to defend Indonesia's territorial integrity in the wake of East Timor's independence after the 1999 referendum there.

"On the surface, Indonesian security forces appear to be in control, having forcibly subdued the broad independence movement that emerged into public view in the province after the fall of Suharto in May 1998," HRW says in a recent report. "Below the surface, however, Papuan sentiment remains overwhelmingly opposed to rule from Jakarta."

The central government will face a major test of its intentions later this month, when the attorney general is expected to decide whether to prosecute a particularly notorious incident in which three students were killed and dozens more were beaten and tortured by security forces last December in Abepura, a college town near the provincial capital, Jayapura. If he proceeds, it would be the first case heard by Indonesia's nascent human rights court. Addressing such abuses in a serious way is the only way to avoid deepening the conflict, according to HRW.

Shortly after becoming president in 1998, Wahid visited West Papua with promises of greater autonomy and an end to human rights abuses by the military. During the past year, however, thousands of new troops have been sent to the province where they have attacked civilians in areas where rebels are believed to be active, moved against independence demonstrators with deadly force, arrested key Papuan leaders, and harassed local human rights and other civil society groups. Contrary to Wahid's early promises, the authorities have banned peaceful demonstrations.

West Papua, unlike the rest of modern-day Indonesia, was retained by the Dutch colonial power when Indonesia achieved complete independence in 1949. The Netherlands agreed to grant it separate independence but, as the process got under way, Indonesia invaded in 1961. Jakarta renamed the province Irian Jaya in 1963; the United States supported Indonesia's bid to incorporate the territory.

Low-level resistance by a small rebel group, the Free Papua Movement (OPM), began shortly after the initial invasion and was never entirely stamped out, despite continuous repression by

Indonesian security forces. Human rights groups and church officials estimate the total number of civilian deaths over the period at 100,000, or roughly ten percent of the total population.

In the meantime, the province became a major moneymaker for the Suharto regime. The U.S. mining company Freeport McMoRan built the world's largest gold mine there and also began exploiting its plentiful copper resources, while Jakarta encouraged tens of thousands of Indonesians from other islands to

move to the relatively sparsely populated region.

Major popular consultations and public demonstrations, especially flag-raising, which took place after the collapse of Suharto's 32-year-old regime showed that most Papuans still aspired to independence from Jakarta. The military and its civilian allies, increasingly concerned about the possible break-up of the country, pressed the government to respond with force. Last September, Amnesty International published a report detailing an upsurge in abuses by

security forces. "It seems that hard-line tactics and repression are once again the order of the day," it said. The new president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, is expected to back the military in its efforts to crush self-determination movements.

(Jim Lobe <jlobe@starpower.net> is a contributing editor with the Self-Determination and Governance Project of Foreign Policy In Focus and with Inter Press Service, an international news agency.)

The Republican Rule

<http://www.fpif.org/republicanrule/index.html>

Essays Include:

Robert Cutler
Karen Hansen-Kuhn
Chris Hellman
Neil Hicks
Chris Toensing
Tomas Valasek
Carol Welch
Ian Williams

A First Glance at Bush's Policy Toward Russia
Bush's Trade Policy: The NAFTA Express
What Can We Expect from the Pentagon?
The Bush Administration and Human Rights
Bush's Middle East Policy: Look to His Advisors
George W. Bush and the "Other" Europe
Republican Rule and the IFIs
The United Nations: Beating Around the Bush

And Many Others!

Profiles Include:

Richard Lee Armitage
Paul O'Neill
Richard N. Perle
Colin Powell
Condoleezza Rice
Donald Rumsfeld
George Schultz
Paul Wolfowitz
Ann Veneman
Robert B. Zoellick