

Violence in Papua: The Role of Military Elements in Perpetuating Violence

By Anthony L. Smith

Two Americans and one Indonesian were killed on August 31 at the hands of an unknown assailant near the Freeport mining operation in Timika, Papua. Initially the Indonesian army blamed a radical wing of the Free Papua Movement. However, according to a report by FBI officers investigating the case, the army fabricated evidence. Also, the Indonesian police have stated that they believe soldiers were very likely involved in this attack. This incident has occurred against a backdrop that raises serious questions about the nature of Indonesia's rule over the province, and the role of the military in particular, since Indonesia took effective control in 1962.

Papua, until recently known as Irian Jaya, constitutes more than 20% of the Indonesian landmass, but has a relatively small population of just over two million (about one percent of Indonesia's population), with about 65% of that population being ethnic Papuan. Papua is, however, extremely diverse, with an estimated 250 to 300 tribal groupings and languages. Most of these tribal groupings had no contact with the outside world until the 1960s.

Papuans Oppose Merger

Papua's merger with Indonesia has not always been a happy one. It is commonplace in Papua itself to argue that the Indonesian government has exercised colonialism over Papua in a more heavy-handed way than the previous Dutch imperial administration. Indonesia's founding president, Sukarno, made it a point of national pride that Papua rightfully belonged to the Republic of Indonesia, based on historical claims. This annexation was made formal by a 1969 plebiscite, in which approximately 1,000 carefully selected Papuan leaders unanimously

opted for integration with Indonesia. The United Nations simply "noted" the plebiscite has having occurred, but it never actually endorsed its outcome.

At the time, UN officials, diplomats, and journalists observed that many, probably most, Papuans were unhappy with the merger. Papuan resistance to the merger was ruthlessly and indiscriminately suppressed by the Indonesian military, including counterattacks in which many noncombatants were the victims. Large numbers of refugees, escaping the violence, have periodically crossed the border with Papua New Guinea. The discovery of Papua's immense mineral wealth—including oil, gas, gold, and copper—has seriously aggravated the preexisting tensions. In the case of the Freeport investment, the Damal and Amungme people were displaced without compensation for their land—their occupancy was not recognized as ownership. The Freeport mining operation has grown from 10,000 hectares of land in 1972 to 2.6 million hectares today. Very little of the returns from this type of investment have remained in Papua itself. Despite the fact that Papua has consistently registered the highest provincial GNP in Indonesia due to its vast mineral wealth, the people of Papua have remained Indonesia's poorest.

Autonomy a Step Forward

Indonesia's democratization in the aftermath of Soeharto's resignation in May 1998 created new opportunities for Papua. Members of the ethnic Papuan elite founded a new independence movement and mounted a challenge to the legal process by which Papua came to be included in Indonesia. Papuan demands, while falling short of gaining independence, did result in a very

generous regional autonomy package that will allow Papua to retain 80% of oil and gas revenues, and high proportions of other types of revenue generation.

The autonomy deal also gives privileges to ethnic Papuans, giving them advantages in employment and reserving high-level administrative positions for indigenes. Multinational corporations have been forced to adapt to the new reality by plowing assistance back into local communities, as they can no longer rely on Jakarta's rule to guarantee their concessions.

Human Rights Abuses Still Rampant

In one crucial respect, however, little has changed in Papua. The human rights problem, and the general lack of due process of law remain nightmarish issues for the province. After a period of brief political openness in the late 1990s, the military and police moved to violently suppress independence sentiment. For example, on 6 October 2000, a number of demonstrators were killed at Wamena by the

police simply for attempting to raise the independence flag (the Bintang Kejora). Routine human rights violations by the security forces have been noted by local and international NGOs and the Indonesian government's own official human rights body, and regularly feature in the U.S. State Department's annual human rights' reports for Indonesia.

In recent times several independence leaders have died under highly suspicious circumstances. An investigation by the Indonesian government concluded that the murder of independence leader Theys Eluay late last year involved members of Indonesia's Special Forces. The security forces stationed in Papua have shown a tendency to act as judge, jury, and executioner in many cases. The recent deaths at Timika raise further questions about the role of the military; in particular the bogus evidence they produced to blame separatists for the deaths, which largely rested on presenting the dead body of the supposed assailant, which Indonesian police have now concluded could not possibly have been the suspect. The dead "suspect," produced by the army, was shown by the police to

have been killed hours prior to the attack. FBI officers, however, said that evidence was both removed and planted around the crime scene. What was the military trying to achieve with all of this? A chorus of voices in Papua have been quick to blame the military itself for the deaths, largely based on the pattern of atrocities in the past, although the truth behind this event may never be fully known.

Despite the great gains that Indonesia's new devolution of power has delivered to the Papuans, human rights have barely improved since authoritarian times. The lesson that the Indonesian military appears unwilling to learn is that this ongoing violence helps reinforce an increasingly robust independence sentiment.

*(Anthony L. Smith
<smitha@apcss.org> is a senior
research fellow at the Asia-Pacific
Center for Security Studies in
Honolulu and writes for Foreign
Policy In Focus (online at
www.fpif.org) on regional issues.
The opinions expressed here are the
personal views of the author.)*