

## Papuans

Updated June 2008

### Profile

Close to 2 million Papuans live in Indonesia (1,460,846 according to the 2000 Indonesia Census), mainly in the western segment of the island of New Guinea, in the two Indonesian provinces of Papua Barat (formerly West Irian Jaya and renamed in February 2007, though the name change still needs to be confirmed by government regulation) and Papua. Most of them are Christians, at least nominally, since many continue animist practices which are not recognized or acknowledged by Indonesian authorities under its policy of Pancasila. Having settled here as a result of a series of migration waves, they constitute numerous groups, many of which are quite small, representing perhaps over 200 distinct Papuan languages. The majority – though not all – of them live in rural areas, dependent primarily on subsistence agriculture with some cash cropping.

### Historical context

The indigenous Papuans are thought to have inhabited the island of Papua for perhaps over 40,000 years.

That the western part of Papua is a part of Indonesia is a happenstance of colonial history. In 1828, in order to separate the Dutch East Indies from the South Pacific British empire, and to avoid leaving any unclaimed areas for the potential interest of the German latecomers to European colonialism, the Dutch proclaimed anything west of 141 degrees to be Dutch territory. The part of the island which lay to the east of this line, Papua New Guinea, was mostly administered as an Australian colony on behalf of the British empire.

The Dutch basically ignored Western New Guinea until the mid-twentieth century. But during the Indonesian independence struggle after the Second World War, the Netherlands refused to hand it over to the Indonesians directly, partly because of its presumed natural resources and partly because the Dutch envisaged the need for a refuge for their Outer Island collaborators after Indonesian independence. Under strong pressure from Jakarta, with the tacit backing of the United States, the Dutch agreed to hand over West Irian Jaya to temporary Indonesian administration in 1963, with the proviso that the United Nations be allowed to supervise a referendum on independence by 1969.

Large portions of the indigenous population may have been unaware of any of these developments, and the Indonesian-administered 1969 ‘Act of Free Choice’ was widely considered to be such a charade that the UN only ‘took note’ rather than ‘endorsed’ the outcome. In the years before 1969, all expressions of pro-independence sentiment by the Papuans were brutally suppressed by the Indonesian military, and 1,025 ‘representatives’ selected by Indonesia and kept under military guard conducted the actual vote. In 1967, two years before the ‘Act of Free Choice’, the government of Indonesia had signed an agreement with US company Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc. to open one of the world’s largest open-cut mines. The agreement, extended in 1991, will expire in 2021.

From the 1970s, mainly through the Indonesian government's transmigrasi programme, perhaps as many as 1 million migrants from other Indonesia islands settled in the provinces of Papua Barat and Papua. Especially since the acceleration of the transmigrasi programme from the 1980s, it is these Indonesian settlers and migrants who mainly occupy the best civil service positions and technical jobs. The government resource exploitation and development policies started in earnest in the 1980s to reallocate land and resources away from the indigenous Papuans.

## **Free Papua Movement**

Some members of the Papuan minority had from the early 1960s opposed Indonesian rule, despite apparent UN and Western sanctions of the so-called 'Act of Free Choice'. Many joined the Free Papua Movement (or OPM) which in 1971 proclaimed a Provisional Revolutionary Government of West Papua. The overwhelming strength of the Indonesian army ensured that the OPM did not make any military gains, yet the impact of the transmigrasi programme and the discriminatory exclusion of ethnic Papuans ensured that support for the rebel group continued.

From the 1970s, mining has become of considerable importance, especially at the Mt Ertsberg gold and copper mine of the Freeport Corporation. New mines opened in the 1990s and mineral products (including oil) represented more than 90 per cent of the value of all exports from West Papua. Little of that income remained in the province and few Melanesians (less than 15 per cent at Freeport's mine) were employed in the mining industry, or in the public service or the commercial sector.

From the 1970s the OPM and other members of the Papuan minority began to target some of these mining, logging or palm oil plantation activities, which they saw as devastating their lands and serving only Indonesian interests. In 1977 Freeport's pipeline to the coast was blown up. There have been repeated outbreaks of violence since then between the OPM and the Indonesian army, which was also hired to protect the Freeport mine. Torture, extra-judicial executions, bombing of Papuan villages by the Indonesian forces and even the use of napalm took place during this period.

The fall of Suharto in 1998 and the ensuing 'Reformasi' movement raised hopes of a radical departure from previous Indonesian policies. In 2000 Papuans held a congress calling for independence: there was a violent response from the Indonesian military against supporters of independence. One of the most prominent pro-independence leaders at the time Theys Eluay, was murdered by Indonesian special forces (KOPASSUS) in 2001. However, Papua was granted 'special autonomy status' in 2000, though the implementation has remained not lived up to expectations. The region was also divided in 2001 into two separate provinces: Papua and Irian Jaya Barat. Even this limited autonomy may be too late, as some population estimates suggest that Papuans now make up less than 50 per cent of the population of both provinces.

## **Current issues**

The situation of the Papuan minority has only improved slightly in recent years, and though they have achieved a greater degree of autonomy since 2001, their status is nowhere as secure as that of the Acehese minority. The Indonesian army continues to respond with force to any sign of separatist activity. The legal system has to some degree been used to protect Papuans, as members of KOPASSUS were found guilty by an Indonesian court in 2003 of murdering Theys Eluay.

Overall, however, the Papuans remain vastly under-represented in economic and political terms. Land concessions for mining and logging and plantations – since they are outside their ultimate control – were granted in complete disregard, and almost always without any compensation or concern for the

consequences on the environment and local Papuan communities. In 2006, Papuans blocked an access road which halted Freeport-McMoRan's mining operations for three days, and in a related incident five security people were killed in protests in the regional capital Jayapura. More security and military personnel have since been deployed in Papua, adding fuel to what may be a volatile situation. Papuans continue to accuse this mining company of paying protection money to the Indonesian military, who in turn use military force to stop Papuans from protesting against the operations of the mine.

In addition, there have been reports in 2006 of OPM attacks on Indonesian army outposts, with some reports linking these to attempts to help students fleeing persecution by the Indonesian army after demonstrations in March 2006. In July 2006 OPM guerrilla commanders announced that they would end their armed struggle and pledged to seek independence for Papua through non-violent means.

There are new threats to the livelihood and lands of Papuans, however. Newly announced palm oil plantations and new contracts concluded with Chinese authorities in 2006 and 2007 for 800,000 cubic metres of threatened rainforest timbers, to be used in construction for the 2008 Olympics, suggest that the rights of Papuans may continue to be set aside by Indonesian central and provincial authorities in the name of economic development.

Though companies such as Freeport-McMoRan have started in the last few years to implement ad hoc programmes to hire more Papuans, ethnic Javanese and other Indonesians continue to trickle in the two Papuan provinces in significant numbers and to occupy the best employment categories within the professions and civil service.

In June 2008, the International Crisis Group (ICG) warned that tensions remained high between the Muslim and Christian communities, particularly along Papua's west coast. ICG pointed to continued Muslim migration from other parts of Indonesia and the rise of exclusivist Christian groups and hard-line Islamists in the area as factors for heightened risk of conflict.