

WB 16-5: WATCHING BRIEF ON WEST PAPUA - AUG 16

This Brief follows an earlier one (April 2011) and covers developments in the period since then, especially action taken to build closer links with the people of West Papua in their search for self-determination.

History

The western part of the island of New Guinea became part of the Dutch East Indies in 1828. When Indonesia was created in 1949, the Netherlands retained the area as Dutch New Guinea. In 1952 the Dutch began to prepare the territory for independence, with education and technical programs, while Indonesia was asserting its claim to the territory. In 1961 the first Papuan parliament was created, a national flag and anthem chosen, and the name West Papua agreed.

When Indonesia began to send military forces into the area, initially the Dutch resisted, but then Indonesia sought support from Russia and the US decided a cold war conflict was unacceptable, and leaned on the Dutch to accede to Indonesia's claim. In 1962 the Netherlands and Indonesia agreed to the UN taking control for six years until a national vote was held. During this time the OPM (Free Papua Movement) was born, working for independence.

In 1969 an "Act of Free Choice" (national plebiscite) was held, and the result was that control of West Papua passed to Indonesia, despite many doubts about the way the vote was conducted, including widespread accounts of human rights violations and the fact that less than 0.01% of the population participated. The province was re-named Irian Jaya by Indonesia. As a result there has been an ongoing conflict about West Papua – with some seeing Indonesian sovereignty as better than an independent state in a very poor area, others regarding self-determination as an essential right of the people.

Numerous incidents have occurred in recent years involving the torture of protesters by the Indonesian military (TNI). Concerns have been raised in the British Parliament and the US Congress, and at an Asia-European Union Summit. There was consternation in West Papua when US President Obama visited Indonesia in late 2010 and praised its democracy, diversity and tolerance. Special Autonomy (as approved in the 2001 Act of the Indonesian Parliament) has not been implemented.

The West Papua Activists

There are many individuals and groups within West Papua who are challenging the status quo and speaking out. However they are constantly harassed by police and military forces, and need outside voices of support. The United Liberation Movement of

West Papua has applied to join the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) of Pacific countries. Benny Wenda, an independence leader, has lived in exile in Britain and is working for a new United Nations-supervised vote on independence. He recently visited Australia to press his case with political and civil society representatives.

Australian Government Policy

In the 1950s Australia took an approach that favoured West Papua remaining under Dutch control until self-determination could be expressed. This changed in the cold war realpolitik of the 1960s, and since then Australia's official position has been to support Indonesian control over West Papua and to refuse to challenge the Indonesian authorities about reports of abuses etc. This approach has been reinforced by the concern about terrorism and the view that Indonesian military forces are more effective than police in countering it.

In 2004 the Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade issued a report on Australia's Relationships with Indonesia. In that report, there was a strong emphasis on rebuilding defence relations with Indonesia following the East Timor conflict, and no reference was made to West Papua in the recommendations of that report. In 2006 Prime Minister John Howard signed a treaty with Indonesia that neither country would support activities that undermine the other's stability. This was seen widely as a direct reference to West Papua. In 2013 Tony Abbott as Prime Minister made it clear that he would not tolerate any anti-Indonesian comments by West Papuan advocates within Australia.

World Council of Churches

Self-determination has been an important issue in the deliberations of the World Council of Churches:

The aspirations of the majority of Papuan people for their right to self-determination have been consistently expressed over the years. Against this background, the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches, meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, 14-17 February 2012:

- A. Expresses its deep concern for the deteriorating situation regarding human rights violations in Tanah Papua;
- B. Requests Indonesian authorities to take necessary steps to release the political prisoners, to lift the ban on peaceful assembly of Papuans and to demilitarize Tanah Papua;
- C. Urges the Indonesian government to initiate necessary steps to enter into dialogue with indigenous Papuan people and to take adequate measures to protect their rights and to provide them with their basic needs and rights as the original inhabitants of Tanah Papua;
- D. Urges the Indonesian Government to ensure that the Indonesian armed forces stop the killing and the causing of serious bodily or mental harm to the Papuan people and the abrogation of their human rights;
- E. Commends the churches and ecumenical partners who are engaged in global advocacy for peace, security and human rights of the Papuans;
- F. Calls on WCC member churches to provide long term accompaniment and also to be engaged in advocacy on peace and security for all Papuans in their struggle for the right to life and right to dignity;
- G. Prays for the people and the churches of Tanah Papua as they continue to be engaged in their prophetic witness for peace, reconciliation and hope

Quaker-led Peace Pilgrimage to West Papua, January/February 2015.

Eleven people – 6 Quakers, a Mennonite, 3 Catholics and a Methodist - were invited by West Papuan church leaders to travel to West Papua to attend celebrations for the 160th anniversary of the Gospel in the Land of Papua. The group sought to build relationships with West Papuans in their nonviolent struggle for justice. They visited Biak, Jayapura, the Paniai highlands and Manokwari, witnessed the suffering of the people, and experienced the repressive presence of the state security forces. The visit was supported by a grant from QPLC.

The group recommended that the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) consider strengthening the links between churches in Australia and churches in West Papua, and seek the support of the World Council of Churches in advocating access by the international press and the release of political prisoners. The NCCA organised a delegation to visit the region in September 2015, and has proposed that a parliamentary delegation be sent.

The Quaker Yearly Meeting, July 2016, was the occasion for the launch of a book by Jason MacLeod called *Merdeka and the Morning Star: civil resistance in West Papua*. The meeting encouraged Australian Friends to be part of a nonviolent campaign to end Australia support for the Indonesian police in their repression of people in West Papua.

Pacific Churches

The Melanesian Anglican Church held a consultation on West Papua on 28 March 2015 and issued the following statement:

“This consultation affirms that it is morally and ethically wrong to remain silent when our brothers and sisters from West Papua are suffering from suppression and human rights atrocities under an oppressive colonial ruler at our very own doorstep. The Melanesian Region, the Pacific and the World at large need to speak out against Indonesian oppression of West Papua and call upon their leaders and government to ‘let God’s people and nation of West Papua go’.”

The Pacific Conference of Churches has long supported self-determination for Pacific people, and reiterated this at its meeting in May 2014 in relation to West Papua. In July 2016 it announced support for a formal complaint to the United Nations Human Rights Council accusing Indonesia of human rights violations in West Papua (Radio New Zealand News, 8 July 2016).

Pacific Islands Forum

There is increasing support for West Papua among the countries of the Pacific, notably by Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. Even Papua New Guinea’s Prime Minister Peter O’Neill said in early 2015 (ABC News, 6 February) that it was “time for PNG to speak about the oppression of our people there”. The 2015 session of the Forum agreed to seek a fact-finding mission to West Papua, but this has been resisted by Indonesia. There is likely to be further focus at the forthcoming Forum meeting in September.

Possible Action

On the recommendation of QPLC, the Presiding Clerk of AYM has sent a letter to the Government seeking a review of Australia's approach to West Papua. The letter includes the following points:

We believe that the Australian Government should review its current approach to West Papua, and support moves for (a) independent assessments of human rights violations there, (b) access by journalists and politicians from Australia and elsewhere to the province, and (c) a fair process under international supervision to allow the people of West Papua to determine their own future.

We also urge you to examine closely the relationship between the Australian Government, the Australian Federal Police, and the Indonesian police. The evidence is mounting that assistance in anti-terrorism training blurs the distinction between terrorism and dissent.

Other action that can be taken:

- Contact your Federal MPs and Senators to find out where they stand on the question of West Papuan autonomy, and what steps they are prepared to take to respond to the ongoing repression there.
- Urge the sending of an Australian Parliamentary delegation to West Papua.
- Press for the Australian Government to cease the funding of the Indonesian anti-terrorist forces that are restricting the rights of West Papuans.
- Seek opportunities to join accompaniment visits to support local people in West Papua.

Further information is available on the following websites:

West Papua News and Information- www.infopapua.org

Free West Papua – www.freewestpapua.org

Canberra
August 2016