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West Papua's Silent Genocide

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2017

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The occupation of West Papua receives little attention in the UK. This is, in no small part, due to Indonesia's ban on foreign journalists and its outlawing of West Papuan social movements who try to speak out internationally. However, West Papua has not been forgotten by international corporations, including companies from the UK. For them, Indonesia's brutal occupation of West Papua provides lucrative opportunities for profit.

Mining companies exploit the country's vast wealth of minerals, with security for their operations provided by the Indonesian military. International arms companies profit from selling Indonesia the weapons it needs to maintain the occupation. The UK government, which gives financial support and training to Indonesian police forces, is also complicit in the repression in West Papua.

West Papuans have called on people in the UK to help stop what they describe as the silent genocide in West Papua.

Over half a century of occupation

West Papua has been occupied by Indonesia since the 1960s, when the US government, keen to open up the country's forests and mineral wealth for US corporations, stepped in to back up Indonesia's invasion. Since then, Indonesia has repressed movements for independence, outlawed the raising of the West Papuan flag and many local traditional customs, colluded with international companies to exploit timber and minerals and carried out rapes, massacres and assassinations.

The Free West Papua Campaign states:

“Over 500,000 civilians have been killed in a genocide against the indigenous population. Thousands more have been raped, tortured, imprisoned or ‘disappeared’ after being detained. Basic human rights such as freedom of speech are denied and Papuans live in a constant state of fear and intimidation.”

Emil, a woman in her twenties, was one of forty-three people who escaped from West Papua in 2006 on a treacherous journey in a canoe. She was only sixteen at the time. We joined her and some of the other refugees in Australia on a 72km ‘Walk for West Papua’. 72km is the distance between Australian territory and West Papua. The activists were speaking to communities along the way about the West Papuan struggle. The group were the first West Papuan refugees to arrive on Australian shores by boat. Emil talked about her family's history of activism.

“In 1988, during the [regime of Indonesian president] Suharto, my uncle raised a West Papuan flag in a public stadium. They jailed him for over twenty years and he died in jail. After my uncle passed away, my brother started raising awareness about West Papua. He was sent to prison three or four times. My parents were scared for us children because we were targets. Every time we went to school we were being watched. I came home from school one day and my parents said ‘you have to go with your brother to Australia’.”

The group set out in the darkness of night in a home-made wooden canoe with two engines. Terrified, Emil left behind her parents and five other siblings.

A young man called Kugi also made the decision to do the crossing: “If I’d stayed I’d have been in the youth movement and would’ve been hunted by the military. I wanted a better life for myself and for the young Papuan generations. I took my brother, who was ten at the time. It was a tough decision.”

The journey should have taken six hours, but took them six days. They had no extra clothes and barely any food or water. Emil explained about the crossing:

“The night we left there was a thunderstorm. An engine of the boat broke. My brother had a compass but that didn’t help much. We followed the stars and moon – how our parents taught us – and we hoped. I thought that we wouldn’t make it. On the sixth day we could see a little dot far away. The dot became bigger. It was Cape York in Queensland. Two hundred metres from the shore, some of the group decided to swim to land. At that time we didn’t know that it was dangerous because of the sharks and crocodiles. When we arrived in Australia we hadn’t eaten for six days.”

On shore, they unfurled a banner saying ‘Save West Papua From Genocide. One People, One Soul’. The next day they were circled by Customs helicopters, cameras and reporters, then were given food and taken to hospital. The Australian Air Force then took them to Christmas Island and the men of the group were put in a detention centre.

After three months they were granted a protection visa – meaning that they could work and attend school – and the group chose to move to Melbourne. Roughly eight years later Emil was given citizenship.

Companies like BAE and Thales, keen to sell more weapons to Indonesia, will be at DSEI next week. Emil was adamant that the DSEI arms fair should be stopped:

“If Indonesia buys weapons at DSEI, the equipment they buy isn’t to protect their citizens; instead they use it on their own citizens. Stop training them, stop them from buying weapons. They’re killing our mothers and daughters. They come to villages in the night and shoot people in their homes. They take people and you never see them again. If you say something like “Free West Papua” they will come and take you. They follow you wherever you go. Stop the arms fair in London.”

According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), global military spending was a massive US\$7.78 billion in 2016. Indonesia's military spending has leapt since 2013, totalling US\$7.78 billion in 2016. Indonesia has the greatest military strength in Southeast Asia, and ranks fourteenth in the world, higher than most European countries.

Of course, a more militaristic world means big profits for the corporations that supply the weapons or build military infrastructure. International arms companies such as Raytheon, Thales, Boeing and Lockheed Martin have all provided Indonesia with weapons.

In 2012, British Prime Minister David Cameron visited Jakarta. He was accompanied by representatives of several arms companies, including BAE Systems. Cameron applauded Indonesia as one of the world's "most inspiring democracies," and used his visit to try to ensure "greater cooperation between our armed forces and our defence industries to give Indonesia global expertise as it modernises its military assets." After the visit, BAE systems began negotiations for the sale of Eurofighter Typhoons to Indonesia.

Also keen to profit from its neighbour's use of arms, in 2016 the Australian government emphasised "the importance of supporting Indonesia as it modernises its defence forces," and signed a collaboration agreement to develop a mine-resistant armoured vehicle.

In 2014, reports stated that Indonesia was the second largest importer of UK arms, with sales of \$306m. In 2017 alone, the UK government has approved a number of arms export licences so that British companies can supply weapons to Indonesia.

"Britain should think twice about helping Indonesia and should not grant licences for weapons," Kugi said. "The military controls Indonesia: the highest people in government come from the military. They use their weapons to scare people not to stand against the government."

Britain regularly invites Indonesian government officials and military personnel to DSEI — the biggest arms fair in the world — in Docklands, London. 1,600 exhibitors will show off their weapons and crowd control equipment in the hope that governments such as Indonesia make deals with them.

Perhaps for fear of future arms embargoes, Indonesia is also expanding its own domestic arms industry. "For years we had an embargo; we don't want to repeat history again," ex-deputy defence minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin said in 2014. Indonesia will be promoting Indo Defence — its own weapons exhibition showcasing Indonesian arms companies— at DSEI in London.

The silent genocide continues today

The international mainstream media has largely forgotten about the occupation of West Papua. This is compounded by the fact that journalists and human rights organisations are refused entry, meaning that the Indonesian state can carry out apartheid with total impunity.

"The silent genocide is still happening," Kugi explained. "Recently, a friend's uncle, who was in the youth movement, was stabbed and then run over by a car. You never know if someone is going to be run over on the street. The police try to make it look like an accident." The activists explained that murders like this never make it into the local news in West Papua, which is controlled by the Indonesian state.

"Life nowadays is quite different, though," Kugi continued. "When we escaped, the news exposed the situation and the world started watching. Today there are smartphones and with one click you can post the news. Now the police often won't hit you in public. They'll take you somewhere where no-one is watching. The police and military often don't expose themselves in public like they used to: they pretend to be locals and don't wear uniforms."

Kugi gave another example of the silent genocide:

"In 2004, the most prominent human rights activist in Indonesia, Munir Thalib, was poisoned on a plane from the Netherlands to Indonesia. Any public figure talking about freedom movements needs to be really careful about what they're eating or drinking. We are also advised by our parents to be careful who we hang out with."

There are still protests on the streets, although we are told that the police put so many conditions in place that it's difficult to get permission for demonstrations. It is still illegal to hold the West Papuan Morning Star flag. "Papuan people are scared and nervous," Amos, who also came in the canoe, explained. "People do protest but the police provoke them. Intelligence officers [agents provocateurs] join the protests and provoke the police, and then the police arrest people."

Papuan people behind bars state that people who attend protests or fly the Morning Star flag are frequently charged with treason. "If convicted, they face prison sentences of up to twenty years or life. Many complaints have been made about the torture and ill-treatment of political prisoners and their lack of access to adequate medical treatment."

According to Human Rights Watch: “Throughout 2016, Indonesian police arrested more than 3,900 peaceful protesters in Papua during protests for causes including support for Papuan independence.”

The Indonesian state continues to try to stamp out West Papuan culture. “You can’t wear West Papua T-shirts, traditional clothes or jewellery on the streets,” said Erwin, who came to Australia independently as a student. “They will say that you’re against the ‘integration’ of Indonesia.”

Despite all this, Kugi remained positive: “Nowadays Papuans are more confident to express their feelings. Before they had the sense that they were worthless. It was like a virus in West Papua. We were always told that our lives couldn’t get any better and that there’d be no opportunities for us. But now not so many people think that way.”

Corporations plunder West Papua

Of course, the Indonesian occupation of West Papua is directly related to corporate interests. US company Freeport-McMoRan operates the Grasberg mine in Papua – the largest gold mine and the third largest copper mine in the world. Freeport’s third largest shareholder, Carl Icahn, happens to be Special Advisor to Donald Trump.

According to Free West Papua Campaign:

“Freeport is Indonesia’s biggest taxpayer, making billions of dollars for the Indonesian government every year. Freeport reportedly pays the Indonesian military around US \$3 million every year in ‘protection money’, ensuring that local West Papuans are kept out of the area.”

TIME states that “In 2015 alone, Freeport mined some \$3.1 billion worth of gold and copper here. In addition, Papua boasts timber resources worth an estimated \$78 billion.”

Amos explained the history behind Freeport’s mining in West Papua: “A contract was signed for Freeport to operate in West Papua before we were even part of Indonesia.” With the help of Henry Kissinger, Freeport was awarded the rights to pillage West Papua. Kissinger later became a Freeport board member.

Australian-British corporation Rio Tinto holds an interest in Freeport’s Grasberg mine, which entitles it to 40% of production, over specified levels until 2021, and 40% of all production after 2021.

Meanwhile, British company BP continues to profit from the occupation through its massive liquified natural gas fields in Tangguh. Kugi told us: “BP’s biggest operation in Southeast Asia is in West Papua, and Papuan communities are also being pushed from their land for palm oil.” According to CorpWatch, an indigenous community in West Papua filed a complaint against Sri Lankan company Goodhope Asia for taking over their land to create a palm plantation.

Britain and Australia complicit in the silent genocide

The arrival of the refugees in 2006 — and the subsequent media attention about the occupation of West Papua — angered the Indonesian government, which temporarily withdrew its ambassador from Australia. However, Australia was keen to keep good relations with Indonesia, and ex-prime minister John Howard signed the Lombok Treaty, a joint agreement with the two countries. One of the terms of the Lombok Treaty is “non-interference in the internal affairs of one another”, effectively silencing any acknowledgement by Australia of Indonesia’s genocide of West Papuans. “Since then, Australia has accepted no refugees from West Papua,” Amos told us.

“Australia’s Defence Minister apologised to Indonesia for exposing the genocide in West Papua,” Kugi explained. “And just recently in Australia, one of my friends [Tyrone Gibb] waved the West Papua flag from the Indonesian consulate balcony.” Tyrone was arrested a full month after his action. “The Indonesian government put pressure on Australia to arrest him,” Kugi said.

Australia, Britain and the US have extensively colluded with Indonesia by training and funding its anti-terror police force, known as Detachment 88, which tortures and kills Papuan activists. Indonesian police are trained at the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation, where funding is also provided by the US, Australia, Britain, Denmark, Canada and New Zealand and the UN. Some of these countries are also involved in police training.

Indonesian military personnel are trained on Australian campuses, costing the Australian people millions of dollars. Furthermore, Kopassus, Indonesia’s special forces military squad, is also trained in Australia. There are numerous reports of Kopassus’s brutality, including the torture, mutilation and beheading of West Papuans.