

The Theft of West Papua's mineral wealth. Let the Bird of Paradise go Free

The province's courageous resistance movement

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When General Suharto, the west's man, seized power in Indonesia in the mid-1960s, he offered "a gleam of light in Asia", rejoiced Time magazine. That he had killed up to a million "communists" was of no account in the acquisition of what Richard Nixon called "the richest hoard of natural resources, the greatest prize in South-east Asia".

In November 1967, the booty was handed out at an extraordinary conference in a lakeside hotel in Geneva. The participants included the most powerful capitalists in the world, the likes of David Rockefeller, and senior executives of the major oil companies and banks, General Motors, British American Tobacco, Imperial Chemical Industries, American Express, Siemens, Goodyear, US Steel. The president of Time Incorporated, James Linen, opened the proceedings with this prophetic description of globalisation: "We are trying to create a new climate in which private enterprise and developing countries work together for the greater profit of the free world. The world of international enterprise is more than governments . . . It is a seamless web, which has been shaping the global environment at revolutionary speed."

Suharto had sent a team of mostly US-groomed economists, known as the "Berkeley Boys". On the first day, salutations were exchanged. On the second day, the Indonesian economy was carved up. This was done in a spectacular way: industry in one room, forests and fisheries in another, banking and finance in another. The ultimate prize was the mineral wealth of West Papua, almost half of a vast and remote island to the north of Australia. A US and European consortium was "awarded" the nickel and gold. The Freeport company of New Orleans got a mountain of copper. Forty-two years later, the gold and copper make more than a million dollars profit every day.

What a carve-up

For the Indonesian elite, enrichment was assured. From 1992 to 2004, Freeport provided \$33bn in direct and indirect "benefits", much of it finding its way to the Indonesian military, the real power in the land, which "protects" foreign investments in the manner of a mafia. The reward for the people of West Papua has been a rate of impoverishment double that of the rest of Indonesia, says a World Bank report. At Bintuni Bay, where BP is exploiting natural gas, 56 per cent of the people live in abject poverty. "More than 90 per cent of villages in Papua do not have basic health facilities," the report noted. In 2005, famine swept the district of Yahukimo, where virgin forests and gas deposits deliver unerring profit. The suffering of West Papuans is seldom reported; the Indonesian government bans foreign journalists and human rights organisations from the hauntingly beautiful territory known by

its indigenous people as “the forgotten bird of paradise”.

When the carve-up of its natural wealth took place, West Papua was not part of but merely claimed by Indonesia, whose former colonial masters, the Dutch, recognised no historical or cultural ties to Jakarta and began to prepare the territory for independence. The Indonesians were having none of it; neither were the Americans, the British and the Australians, who invented a cold-war tale that the Russians were coming. In 1962, the Dutch handed the colony to the United Nations, which promptly gave it “on trust” to Indonesia on condition that the West Papuans would vote on their future.

In 1969, an “Act of Free Choice” took place. The Indonesians hand-picked 1,026 West Papuan men and ordered them to vote for integration with Jakarta. Guns were pointed at heads. When two West Papuans escaped in a light aircraft, hoping to reach New York and alert the UN general assembly, they were detained by the Australian government after landing at nearby Manus Island. West Papuan villages wanting a genuine “act of free choice” were bombed by Indonesia’s US-equipped air force.

Independence day

West Papua would have slipped into oblivion had it not been for a resistance, the OPM, or Free Papua Movement, whose endurance has defied almost impossible odds. The Indonesians have been unsparing in their oppression, aided by British-made machine guns and Tactica water cannon vehicles. When Suharto was deposed in 1998, the people on the island of Biak celebrated by singing hymns of thanksgiving and raising West Papua’s Morning Star flag. For this, 150 of them were murdered by the Indonesian military. In 2004, Filep Karma and Yusak Pakage were sentenced to 15 and ten years respectively for raising the flag, an immeasurable act of bravery in a territory effectively run by a Gestapo-style force known as Kopassus, which bears responsibility for much of the genocide in East Timor. The destruction of West Papuan society is also genocide.

The post-Suharto regime in Jakarta, which likes to regard itself as a respectable democracy, is vulnerable to pressure on West Papua. In Britain, the mining giant Rio Tinto, formerly a shareholder in Freeport, retains a joint-venture interest that has earned fortunes for the company. On the rare occasions that the Foreign Office is challenged about the behaviour of Jakarta in West Papua, officials drone about “respecting the territorial integrity of Indonesia”, echoing decades of Foreign Office mendacious apologies for the slaughter in East Timor. And yet East Timor slipped Suharto’s leash and is now free, thanks to the resilience of its people and an international network of support. The people of West Papua deserve nothing less. On 1 December, which West Papuans call their independence day, those exiled in Britain and their allies will assemble outside the Indonesian embassy in London to break the silence.

The Free West Papua Campaign website is www.freewestpapua.org. To help, email office@freewestpapua.org

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