



Looming Confrontation in West Papua – Churches Express Deep Concern

UnitingWorld's John Barr reflects on West Papua, the risk of confrontation and how churches in Australia can be supporting our neighbours.

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The Indonesian military no doubt see West Papua as a troubled region. For fifty years the issue of independence has fired the aspirations of indigenous Papuans who live in a region just to the north of Australia. Indonesia says it will not let West Papua go.

The presence of security forces – police, military and intelligence is at a premium and they are there as a means of keeping this so-called “rogue” region under control. It's obvious these forces will resort to violence to suppress protest and to silence those who advocate “merdeka” (independence).

Meanwhile, many Papuans see their home as being occupied by foreigners, by those whose culture and religion are different. “We are Pacific people” they say. “They are Asians”. “We are Christian....they are Muslim”. The history of Indonesian rule in West Papua is characterized by a real lack of trust, by brutal military operations, human rights abuses and the marginalization of local communities.

Papuans are losing hope and they have had enough. Some say they are “willing to die for the sake of their freedom!”

These observations have developed over many years travelling to the region. I was last in West Papua in early November followed by a visit to Jakarta a few days ago.

A confrontation looms here.

Thursday December 1st is the 50th anniversary since Papuan independence was first declared. On that date the “Morning Star” flag was raised besides the Dutch flag as West Papua moved from Dutch colonial rule to a United Nations mandate. That mandate was handed to Indonesia some two years later and history now demonstrates West Papua was, somewhat controversially, incorporated into the Republic of Indonesia in 1969 after a sham “act of free choice”.

Papuans will now gather across West Papua on Thursday December 1st to vent their frustrations and to raise their aspirations for self-determination and independence. Indonesian security forces are ready to brutally suppress such actions. In some ways the scenario resembles East Timor during the 1990's as local agitation for independence was ruthlessly put down and “punished”.

Our partner church, the Evangelical Christian Church in the Land of Papua is very concerned. The church understands local aspirations and it encourages the community to be one that lives in hope. However, the church is aware that the situation now could simply erupt with many more lives at risk. Recent developments, with another declaration of independence made during the Third Papua National Congress held in October this year, has put many Papuans on a real collision course with Jakarta.



The Indonesian Communion of Churches and the Indonesian Bishop's Conference share this concern. These bodies have made public statements calling for an end to militarism in West Papua and for the withdrawal of excessive security forces. The churches are advocating for an urgent dialogue on West Papua's future between respected Papuan leaders and the Indonesian Government.

I sense a growing concern and uneasiness across Indonesia regarding raised tensions in West Papua. Many Indonesians are concerned about the escalating violence even if they know little about the actual situation. The Indonesian Government is subsequently under pressure to do something and it is responding with a proposal for "constructive communication".

What happens next?

Voices must be heard. Alternatives to violence must be sought. The rights and dignity of all Papuans must be respected.

So much is at stake here. Rev Gomar Gultom, General Secretary of the Indonesian Communion of Churches, made an appeal recently to "stop the violence and to immediately set up a Jakarta-Papua dialogue". Other church leaders are voicing similar calls.

A lot of work needs to be done in a place we know as a near neighbour. But time is short. Tragically, the absence of an effective way forward in West Papua means even more people will die.



Call for prayer:

Our partner church in West Papua, along with the Indonesian Communion of Churches, is calling us to prayer as December 1st approaches.

Please Pray for:

- An end to the escalating violence and an end to brutal military force used against the Papuan people.
- A just and peaceful outcome to the issues in West Papua where the rights and the dignity of all people are respected.
- For the leaders of our partner church, the Evangelical Christian Church in the Land of Papua – Rev Albert Yoku (Moderator), Rev Jemima Mirino-Krey (Vice Moderator) and Rev Adadikom (General Secretary) as they work for peace and minister to those who are violated and traumatised by the violence.
- For the leaders of churches throughout Indonesia and particularly for the Rev Dr Adreas Yewangoe (Chair of the Indonesian Communion of Churches) and the Rev Gomar Gultom (General Secretary) as they raise concerns about West Papua with the Indonesian authorities and seek a positive way forward.
- Give thanks for the vibrant faith of the Papuan community as they face great uncertainty and hardship.
- On Thursday December 1st pause for a moment and pray for peaceful negotiation between the Papuan people and the Indonesian Government



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