

The secret war against West Papua

In 1993, I and four others travelled clandestinely across East Timor to gather evidence of the genocide committed by the Indonesian dictatorship. Such was the depth of silence about this tiny country that the only map I could find before I set out was one with blank spaces stamped “Relief Data Incomplete”. Yet few places had been as defiled and abused by murderous forces. Not even Pol Pot had succeeded in despatching, proportionally, as many people as the Indonesian tyrant Suharto had done in collusion with the “international community”.

In East Timor, I found a country littered with graves, their black crosses crowding the eye: crosses on peaks, crosses in tiers on the hillsides, crosses beside the road. They announced the murder of entire communities, from babies to the elderly. In 2000, when the East Timorese, displaying a collective act of courage with few historical parallels, finally won their freedom, the United Nations set up a truth commission; on 24 January, its 2,500 pages were published. I have never read anything like it. Using mostly official documents, it recounts in painful detail the entire disgrace of East Timor’s blood sacrifice. It says that 180,000 East Timorese were killed by Indonesian troops or died from enforced starvation. It describes the “primary roles” in this carnage of the governments of the United States, Britain and Australia. America’s “political and military support were fundamental” in crimes that ranged from “mass executions to forced resettlements, sexual and other horrific forms of torture as well as abuse against children”. Britain, a co-conspirator in the invasion, was the main arms supplier. If you want to see through the smokescreen currently around Iraq, and understand true terrorism, read this document.

As I read it, my mind went back to the letters Foreign Office officials wrote to concerned members of the public and MPs following the showing of my film *Death of a Nation*. Knowing the truth, they denied that British-supplied Hawk jets

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were blowing straw-roofed villages to bits and that British-supplied Heckler and Koch machine-guns were finishing off the occupants. They even lied about the scale of suffering.

And it is all happening again, wrapped in the same silence and with the “international community” playing the same part as backer and beneficiary of the crushing of a defenceless people. Indonesia’s brutal occupation of West Papua, a vast, resource-rich province – stolen from its people, like East Timor – is one of the great secrets of our time. Recently, the Australian minister of “communications”, Senator Helen Coonan, failed to place it on the map of her own region, as if it did not exist.

An estimated 100,000 Papuans, or 10 per cent of the population, have been killed by the Indonesian military. This is a fraction of the true figure, according to refugees. In January, 43 West Papuans reached Australia’s north coast after a hazardous six-week journey in a dugout. They had no food, and had dribbled their last fresh water into their children’s mouths. “We knew,” said Herman Wainggai, the leader, “that if the Indonesian military had caught us, most of us would have died. They treat West Papuans like animals. They kill us like animals. They have created militias and jihadis to do just that. It is the same as East Timor.”

For over a year, an estimated 6,000 people have been hiding in dense jungle after their villages and crops were destroyed by Indonesian special forces. Raising the West Papuan flag is “treason”. Two men are serving 15 and ten-year sentences for merely trying. Following an attack on one village, a man was presented as an “example” and petrol poured over him and his hair set alight.

When the Netherlands gave Indonesia its independence in 1949, it argued that West Papua was a separate geographic and ethnic entity with a distinctive national character. A report published last November by the Institute of Netherlands History in The Hague revealed that the Dutch had secretly recognised the “unmistakable beginning of the formation of a Papuan state”, but were bullied by the administration of John F Kennedy to accept “temporary” Indonesian control over what a White House adviser called “a few thousand miles of cannibal land”.

The West Papuans were conned. The Dutch, Americans, British and Australians backed an “Act of Free Choice” ostensibly run by the UN. The movements of a UN monitoring team of 25 were restricted by the Indonesian military and they were denied interpreters. In 1969, out of a population of 800,000, some 1,000 West Papuans “voted”. All were selected by the Indonesians. At

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gunpoint, they “agreed” to remain under the rule of General Suharto – who had seized power in 1965 in what the CIA later described as “one of the worst mass murders of the late 20th century”. In 1981, the Tribunal on Human Rights in West Papua, held in exile, heard from Eliezer Bonay, Indonesia’s first governor of the province, that approximately 30,000 West Papuans had been murdered during 1963-69. Little of this was reported in the west.

The silence of the “international community” is explained by the fabulous wealth of West Papua. In November 1967, soon after Suharto had consolidated his seizure of power, the Time-Life Corporation sponsored an extraordinary conference in Geneva. The participants included the most powerful capitalists in the world, led by the banker David Rockefeller. Sitting opposite them were Suharto’s men, known as the “Berkeley mafia”, as several had enjoyed US government scholarships to the University of California at Berkeley. Over three days, the Indonesian economy was carved up, sector by sector. An American and European consortium was handed West Papua’s nickel; American, Japanese and French companies got its forests. However, the prize – the world’s largest gold reserve and third-largest copper deposit, literally a mountain of copper and gold – went to the US mining giant Freeport-McMoran. On the board is Henry Kissinger, who, as US secretary of state, gave the “green light” to Suharto to invade East Timor, says the Dutch report.

Freeport is today probably the biggest single source of revenue for the Indonesian regime: the company is said to have handed Jakarta 33 billion dollars between 1992 and 2004. Little of this has reached the people of West Papua. Last December, 55 people reportedly starved to death in the district of Yahukimo. The Jakarta Post noted the “horrible irony” of hunger in such an “immensely rich” province. According to the World Bank, “38 per cent of Papua’s population is living in poverty, more than double the national average”.

The Freeport mines are guarded by Indonesia’s special forces, who are among the world’s most seasoned terrorists, as their documented crimes in East Timor demonstrate. Known as Kopassus, they have been armed by the British and trained by the Australians. Last December, the Howard government in Canberra announced that it would resume “co-operation” with Kopassus at the Australian SAS base near Perth. In an inversion of the truth, the then Australian defence minister, Senator Robert Hill, described Kopassus as having “the most effective capability to respond to a counter-hijack or hostage recovery threat”. The files of human-rights organisations overflow with evidence of Kopassus’s terrorism. On 6 July 1998, on the West Papuan island of Biak, just north of Australia, special

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forces massacred more than 100 people, most of them women.

However, the Indonesian military has not been able to crush the popular Free Papua Movement (OPM). Since 1965, almost alone, the OPM has reminded the Indonesians, often audaciously, that they are invaders. In the past two months, the resistance has caused the Indonesians to rush more troops to West Papua. Two British-supplied Tactical armoured personnel carriers fitted with water cannon have arrived from Jakarta. These were first delivered during the late Robin Cook's "ethical dimension" in foreign policy. Hawk fighter-bombers, made by BAE Systems, have been used against West Papuan villages.

The fate of the 43 asylum-seekers in Australia is precarious. In contravention of international law, the Howard government has moved them from the mainland to Christmas Island, which is part of an Australian "exclusion zone" for refugees. We should watch carefully what happens to these people. If the history of human rights is not the history of great power's impunity, the UN must return to West Papua, as it did finally to East Timor.

Or do we always have to wait for the crosses to multiply?