

West Papuans in the era of Environmental Justice and Climate Crisis as people of African descent

1. **Introduction**

Solidarity for Indigenous Papuans[[1]](#footnote-1) (SIP) is a network of NGOs and activists within West Papua that aspire to address among other issues human rights and climate change within the indigenous West Papuan communities and advocate through its existing national, regional and international NGO networks for solidarity and support.

The indigenous people of West Papua occupy the Western part of the island of New Guinea to the North of Australia in the South-West Pacific Ocean. The Papuans are Melanesians of the Pacific considered as part of the people of African descent. Papuans were controversially integrated into the Republic of Indonesia in the 1960s, currently forms part of the two eastern provinces of Papua and West Papua in Indonesia. Indigenous Melanesian people of West Papua made up about one percent of the population of Indonesia considered as one of the minority groups[[2]](#footnote-2) in Indonesia.

West Papua since its controversial integration[[3]](#footnote-3) into the Indonesian republic in 1963 has experienced a decrease in its Melanesian population, destruction of their cultures, displacement of people as refugees and internally displaced peoples[[4]](#footnote-4) (IDPs), language extinction, environmental destruction, resource exploitation and other human rights abuses under heavy military occupation over the last 57 years. West Papuans for the most part were not recognized as the cultural, economic, political, and scientific contributing members of the people of Indonesia who also part of Indonesia with full acceptance of their natural membership to the African descent.

1. **West Papua Conflict**

Valmaine Toki’s report (E/C.19/2013/12) of 20th February 2013 identified the real problem faced by West Papua indigenous people. According to the report;

46. The indigenous peoples of West Papua are struggling to acquire their right to self-determination and independence. The urgent need to tackle their issue is heightened by reports of violence, as noted in the report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review in July 2012 (A/HRC/21/7).

47. According to Akihisa Matsuno, a professor at the Osaka School of International Public Policy who specializes in Indonesia, what is happening in West Papua amounts to genocide, both physical and cultural. He said that, at the very least, it was a crime against humanity in terms of a systematic annihilation of the civilian population that was intentional, widespread and ongoing[[5]](#footnote-5).

48. These current injustices provide additional reasons to support claims of independence, claims that have their roots in historical wrongs. The first colonization was in 1828, when the Netherlands took control of the area. In 1944, it was agreed that the West New Guinea Administration (Netherlands New Guinea) would be placed on the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories

1. **Environmental Justice**

Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) taking over vast areas of land backed by the military and police are a major concern in West Papua along with Government’s sponsored transmigration[[6]](#footnote-6) programs over the years to work in palm oil plantations, logging, mining and other natural resources investments. Military backed land grabbing is familiar in most indigenous communities in Indonesia of which West Papua seems to be the hotspot. Indigenous people are being driven off their lands with no legal, political, economic or social protection by the state to support themselves and their families. The negative impact of climate change combined with land grabbing isolates the indigenous people and directly deny their rights to their land, loss of their cultural sites, hunting, fishing and gardening sites, loss of their dignity and prone to rebellion. Taking up arms by indigenous West Papuans9 is the only option because the laws in Indonesia seem to protect the majority, leaving out the minorities and the indigenous peoples.

Cultural knowledge is rapidly being lost due to armed conflict and displacement[[7]](#footnote-7), loss of land and secret sites through land grabbing by MNCs, migration and influence from outside. Papuan languages are experiencing extinction with decreasing number of tribal communities especially in the coastal regions and urban centres of West Papua. It is frighting because the whole tribes are being wiped out with no traces of their languages and cultural practices remaining or documented. In 2018, 6 major tribal groups in Kerom regency including their languages and cultures were reported extinct by the local government. Their land and cultural sites including tribal names were allowed to be adopted by existing tribes a common trend in West Papuan communities.

1. **Climate Crisis**

Climate change is a new phenomenon in West Papua that has adverse effects on the livelihood of the indigenous people who are already marginalised and forced into fringes of major coastal towns and cities throughout the province. It is more destructive in a sense that it affects their traditional fishing grounds, hunting, gardening and secret sites and their normal day to day routine. Climate induced natural disasters like torrential rains, floods, landslides, strong winds[[8]](#footnote-8), temperature changes and changing weather patterns are affecting the lives of the indigenous people of West Papua.

Indigenous West Papuans were traditionally hunters and gatherers as well as gardening and fishing. Climate change impacts on the communities in Biak Island, northern part of mainland New Guinea that was observed by our partners were;  
1. Fishermen can no longer rely on traditional knowledge of astronomy /stars observation to know the shady or choppy sea season due to unpredictable weather patterns, cloud cover and rough seas as a result of rise in sea level;  
2. Farmers can no longer determine when to start planting due to changing positions of certain constellations which influences sudden changes of weather from dry season to wet season makes people confused on when to do gardening and planting.  
3. These constant changes results in the reduction of the production of local foods, both vegetables and domestic animals, affecting the nutritional intake for women and children.

In Merauke, southern part of West Papua: 1. the dry season is longer (7-8 months), causing peatlands to become dry and flammable. Carbon stock (chemical formula C) is very high in Papua. And the release of carbon due to burning peatlands contributes to the worsening climate change situation; 2. People also burn peatlands to get young shoots and also allow games to eat the shoots to be hunted by indigenous peoples for food which also contributes to carbon dioxide in the air; 3. The dry season makes food stocks abundant like tilapia fish and other stocks of fish; 4. Rainy season brings floods due to extreme rain including strong winds; 5. Sago plants become the main food source, because planting rice, needs a lot of water to be harvested. Planting local foods like palawija (patatas, taro or cassava) need enough water as well and water is difficult to obtain in the dry season.

1. **Human rights Crisis[[9]](#footnote-9)**

The practice of impunity in West Papua has been a norm throughout the Indonesian occupation of the territory. According to Amirudin Al Rahab, one of the senior researchers in Elsam Jakarta; “the New Order Military Regime of President Suharto made Papua the valued possession for Indonesian Land Forces (Angkatan Darat-AD) of the Indonesian Military. The military and para-military officers’ grip hold of the political, administration and economic life of the province under the dual-function (dwifungsi) powers of the military and turned Papua into a military operation area (daerah operasi militer or DOM) since then.” There were atrocity crimes committed against the indigenous people of West Papua including the denial of their basic right to vote in 1969 by the government of Indonesia over the years, yet not a single one of those were tried for their actions in the Indonesian court. West Papuans were killed like animals and forgotten about how their families would think; it is so troubling mentally about how Indonesians treated West Papuans over the years. Even the known cases like Biak Massacre, Wamena Massacre, Abe massacre and Paniai shooting have not been resolved by the government. Tensions still remain high among the indigenous Papuans to date.

The countless extra-judicial killings, torture, enforced disappearance, rape, mutilation, destruction of schools, health centres, villages, food gardens and other properties by the military have not been addressed under Indonesian laws. Not even a single case was ever won by the people of West Papua over the entire occupation of the territory by Indonesian military. Every victim including women and children that were murdered, tortured or raped were labelled as OPM members categorized under criminals and bandits or simply law breakers worthy of the punishment given in the name of Indonesian Republic. As Amirundin puts it, “Indonesian military sees every West Papuan as a member of the OPM unless he/she denounced publicly that they were not members.”

According to Dr Benny Giyai one of the well-respected clergy men in West Papua, “West Papuans cannot forget about the inhuman treatment under Indonesian military over the years, they were treated as objects for military operations” and not as human beings worthy of respect. In West Papua every human right law has been violated by Indonesian military and police yet escaped punishment in broad daylight. This type of treatment ensured a deep distrust between the Indonesian government and the people of West Papua. Everything is controlled by Indonesian military and police and there is no civilian that has absolute power in West Papua, even the governors and regency administrators had to comply with the military protocols.

1. **Racial Discrimination**

West Papuans are a product of a racial construct since the Dutch colonial era. One of the historians, Richard Chauvel stated that, Dutch’s dual colonial system contributed to the West Papuan’s sense of separateness from Indonesia[[10]](#footnote-10). The administration created the hierarchical division by putting Indonesians and West Papuans on the second and third layers of the society respectively, whilst the Dutch colonizers occupy at the top in society. When Indonesians declared their independence in 1945, the division was deepened by the stigmatization they created and attached to the West Papuans as black monkeys from Africa, lazy, stupid, and primitive people. Marginalization, racism, migrant-bias development practices, human rights violence, economic exploitation and depopulation have contributed to the increased dichotomy of West Papuan and Indonesian identities. West Papuans are oppressed at all levels whose lives were being fully determined by the superior Indonesians who think they know what is best for ignorant West Papuans.

The structural racism that was deeply rooted in West Papuans’ societies, have led to the normalization of police brutality and targeted violence. The pre-conceived notions of prejudices, and racialization formed the knowledge to support the normality of violence in Black identity in Indonesia. The best example in West Papuan[[11]](#footnote-11) context was when Indonesian government deployed thousands of troops to the region, stopped the internet access and criminalized many activists that responded to the widespread anti-racism protests in August 2019[[12]](#footnote-12). The dominant security measures resulted from the stigmatization of West Papuans as separatists and destructive people. The main problem of systemic racism in West Papua is the tagging and diversion of racism mixed with separatism and nationalism: it is embedded in the policy and main institutions of states that justify the use of coercive power by the superior identity against the West Papuans.

1. **Cultural Genocide**

**West Papua was annexed by Indonesian Republic in 1963, since then Indonesian government forced West Papuans to conform to the Indonesian standards of identity and cultural recognition within the Indonesian state. West Papuans were forced to abandon their culture, language, customs and all other aspects of traditions that were passed on from generation to generation. It was a cultural genocide that was imposed by Indonesian government on Indigenous Papuans in the name of civilization. The annexation was the start of the 60 years old West Papua conflict that is still being fought today. The armed conflict between West Papua National Liberation Army and Indonesian Military is one of the longest conflicts for independence in this part of the world. Any cultural expression were banned, their musicians killed or imprisoned, languages banned from speaking in public and many other restrictions that were put in place for almost 50 years.**

In the minds of Papuans, Indonesia was, and is still remains to this day a colonizer in West Papua. What Indonesia has been doing through development and Autonomy package is only a ‘ripe banana remedy’ to cool off the conflict in West Papua; the temporary band aid solution will never work to settle the dispute as West Papuans knew too well the Indonesian’s strategy to keep Papua under Indonesian rule. The Indonesia’s own research institute LIPI’s four point peaceful resolution to Papua conflict stated clearly that Papua problem will never end unless the Indonesian government address the ‘historical, economic, social and human rights violations’ done to the West Papuan people by the state over the years.

West Papuans do not have hope inside Indonesia, their culture and even their lives are in danger of extinction if they continue to be under Indonesian rule. The death tall daily in West Papua is alarming and has been a cause for concern by the upper authorities in West Papua for many years now. United Nations needs to speed up decolonization process in West Papua because the conflict is an unfinished business of that decolonization process in the 1960s as per UNGA resolution 1514 of 14th December, 1960.

1. **Indigenous-led initiatives and State responses**

The major partners in the SIP network of CSOs like JERAT Papua and YADUPA are some of the frontline CSOs that are addressing the indigenous issues through training, conducting workshops, introducing new methods of adaptation and local food preservation, production and consumption of local food, among other things. Legal environment in Indonesia is still not suitable for the full realization of indigenous rights enshrined in the UNDRIP which makes implementation and realization of some sectors difficult.

Traditional food growing and preservation initiatives driven by JERAT Papua and YADUPA among Biak and Merauke people of West Papua have some positive impact within the indigenous communities. With the current COVID 19 crisis local government including CSOs are appealing to the people to go back to the land and grow traditional food for survival which is a positive call due to the existing culture of gardening, preserving and consumption of local food. Cultural school program in Biak currently run by YADUPA to teach cultural practices of food preservation and other aspects could be assisted to further establish in many parts of the province to preserve the local cultures before they extinct. YADUPA’s trial in Biak in the coast and Yalimo in the highlands are positive trials that are encouraging.

Indonesian government’s initiatives that focus on urban Papuans like ‘Pasar mama mama Papua’ or markets built for Papuan mothers to sell their garden produce, Trans Papua road projects and other infrastructures are being developed throughout Papua by the Indonesian government to for indigenous Papuans good initiatives by the government. These infrastructures are improving the lives of indigenous Papuans who live in the cities but not many Papuans are benefiting from the projects. Immigrants are enjoying the benefits of development in cities while Papuans still suffer injustice and discriminated against. These high impact projects are taking place where the immigrants are mostly located and are not targeted for West Papuans.

The Law number 21 of 2001 Special Autonomy[[13]](#footnote-13) was the answer that Indonesian government took to address all the problems in West Papua after the ‘reformation era’. Development approach that Indonesian government took since 2001 was focused on providing services in West Papua but the actual implementation was focused on where migrants were located mostly in the coastal towns of the island and left Indigenous population without standard basic services. The government sent in military and police instead to where the local Papuans were mostly located especially in the highlands areas where they are intimidated, hunted and killed as traitors. The exclusion and distinctions made by government to exclude indigenous Papuans from accessing government services is one of the reasons why West Papua is still way behind in development.

West Papuans do not own businesses even to own simple taxi services or a trade store business. The immigrants own stores and all the business activities in all towns and cities in West Papua and outnumbered West Papuans owned businesses. Banks do not allow local people to even get loan to start business, closing financial opportunities to the indigenous communities. In politics immigrants’ fill majority of the local parliamentary seats giving less voice for the local Papuan population. Military and Police chiefs have the upper hand in all the decision making in the province, the local government is only used as a rubber stamp.

The urban indigenous peoples’ access to adequate healthcare; employment opportunities; culturally appropriate education and language instruction; housing, drinking water, sanitation and other critical infrastructure in West Papua is not addressed to the maximum. Many Papuans are jobless, homeless and have a sense of lost identity because their cultural heritage were destroyed or neutralized by the Indonesian government. Urbanization is good for West Papuans but if they could be allowed to have their own country, they would govern better. West Papuans cannot prosper under Indonesia and that has been proven over the last 60 years Indonesian rule.

1. **West Papua and SDG 2030**

The last five (5) years of implementing Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030 (SDG 2030) since 2015 has catapult Indonesia’s economic success. It has enabled Indonesia to invest heavily into education, health, agriculture, commerce and other sectors of the economy boosting living standards and creating millions of jobs for its 273 million people. However, the economic miracle that Indonesia enjoyed over the years occurred at the expense of mounting human rights violation and environmental destruction. The suppression of Indigenous peoples rights, LGBT rights, People With Disability, minority rights and environmental destruction in Papua and Boneo Islands where vast forests are being destroyed are but a few areas that Indonesian government has been overlooking in the last five years.

West Papua region in Indonesia tells the exact opposite of Indonesia’s success story over the same period that seems to paint a negative image on Indonesia. West Papua may appear insignificant in terms of population yet contain almost half of Indonesia’s land mass that commands attention when it comes to protecting its natural environment and its diverse indigenous cultures. SDGs 13 and 16 have not been implemented up to date in Papua region which in turn has been affecting the implementation of other SDGs in the region. There is a clear lack of empowerment among the indigenous people and disregard for the environment in West Papua. West Papuans have been excluded systematically from participating in the formal economic activities in Indonesia.

1. **Recommendation**

(a) Reiterating Toki’s report, the UNGA should reconsider that;

50. There are clear grounds for the General Assembly to support reinstatement on the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories. First, West Papua had satisfied the criteria set down in resolution 1541 (XV). Second, it had featured initially on the list. Third, the right of self-determination is articulated in article 3 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

51. In view of the human rights violations, urgency is recommended. The  
significance of severe human rights violations such as death and perpetual  
discrimination requires action. The indigenous peoples of West Papua cannot even raise their flag or meet in large assemblies without reprisals that violate many human rights enshrined in the Declaration. The Declaration may offer a path towards reconciliation in many of the examples reviewed herein.

1. Indonesia should be urged to grant UN Human Rights Commissioner full access to Papua region to investigate and verify the allegations of gross human rights violation;
2. Indonesia should be urged to take action to resolve gross human rights violations that have been verified by the national human rights commission of Indonesia (Komnas HAM).

1. This report is prepared by Solidarity for Indigenous Papuans (SIP) as a response to the call by the Working Group on African Descent. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Indigenous groups in Indonesia; <https://www.iwgia.org/en/indonesia.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brief history of how West Papua was integrated could be read here; <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/west-papua-issues-wont-go-away-melanesia> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. More info about IDPs could be found here; <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/396527/indonesian-govt-neglecting-papuans-displaced-by-conflict-researcher> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Foot note number 12 in the original foot note; Marni Cordell, “Does West Papua have a publicity problem?”, 3 March 2011. Available from;  
   http://newmatilda.com/2011/03/0 3/does-west-papua-have-publicity-problem. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A research conducted by YADUPA on immigration; <https://yadupa.org/2019/02/20/hasil-riset-yadupamenyebutkan-orang-port-numbay-makin-minoritas/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Example of indigenous West Papuans protesting for their land;  
   <https://www.jeratpapua.org/2018/09/01/pabrik-kelapa-sawit-pt-bia-merauke-dipalang-pemilik-hal-ulayat/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Wind is really strong these days; <https://www.jeratpapua.org/2019/10/26/fenomena-perubahan-iklim-angindisertai-udara-dingin-landa-kota-merauke/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Current updates about West Papua HR violations could be read in detailed from the [ICP](https://www.humanrightspapua.org/), [ELSAM](https://elsam.or.id/), [TAPOL](https://www.tapol.org/) and [Human Rights Watch](https://www.hrw.org/) websites. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/PS014.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/indonesia-deploys-troops-west-papua-region-protests-spread-  
    190820230710563.html [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.humanrightspapua.org/news/23-2017/247-papuan-student-faces-six-month-imprisonmentsentence> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. More about Autonomy could be read here;  
    <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1496&context=cilj> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)