

Critical Situation in Papua

March 2006

Description of Events:

At 4pm on Thursday 16th March I received a phone call from a Papuan colleague who is teaching English in Abepura, Papua. He was calling me from the campus of the "I.S.Kinje" Theological Seminary that is next to the campus of Cendrawasih University in Abepura. My colleague called me because he was very concerned about the demonstration that had taken place that involved the killing of police officers together with gunfire coming from the BRIMOB (Indonesian Mobile Police Brigade). I was informed this gunfire was aimed towards the crowd and people were in great danger as the gunfire intensified.

Approximately half an hour later my colleague called again. I could hear the gun fire clearly over the phone. It was intense and people were screaming. We could only speak for a short time before my colleague had to run for protection.

The reason for these calls related to a real fear that (quoting my colleague) "this would become another Santa Cruz.". Students had been demonstrating since Wednesday. They had blocked the road and on Thursday morning coconut trees were felled across the main road while old tyres were set alight. On Thursday afternoon, just after noon, BRIMOB moved in with gas (tear gas?) and also started firing their weapons.

I was informed that one student had subsequently been shot dead while two students suffered serious gun shot wounds. One student was shot in his left side. He is a student at the theological seminary. Meanwhile, the second student was shot in his chest. These two students were taken to Sara Clinic, a facility operated by the wife of the retiring Protestant Church Chairman. Her name is Mary Saud. Mary, a qualified sister and midwife, was unable to offer the wounded students adequate care and they were then taken to a local hospital.

My colleague also reported that four security officers had been killed by the students. Two bodies remained on the university campus and I was told at least one of these dead police officers were wearing civilian clothes and were operating as intelligence agents. This outraged the students. Their actions were brutal with police being hit by rocks and stabbed with sharp weapons.

During a later phone call to my colleague around 6.15pm, I was told demonstrators had attacked the Sheraton Hotel in Timika yesterday while the focus of the demonstration in Abepura concerned a call to close the Freeport Mine and a call for the military to leave Papua.

(2)

Police now commenced a “sweeping” operation as they tried to identify those responsible for the deaths of their colleagues. They were reportedly “very angry” and were seeking revenge. A further phone call to a Uniting Church Volunteer who is teaching at STIE Ottow dan Geissler (Economics and Management College) in nearby Kota Raja, confirmed the incidence of gun shots and the police “sweeping”.

On Friday morning 17th March I received an email from Rev Socratez Yoman, Chairman of the Baptist Churches in Papua. Rev Socratez Yoman informed me that his vehicle had been stuck in the traffic on the main road outside the university campus. BRIMOB then came and seized the vehicle. It was then smashed up and destroyed by the police officers.

Rev Socratez Yoman said students were being pursued by police during the night. He also said students were being mistreated by actions he described as “being cruel”. These actions were, in Rev Socratez Yoman’s terms, very “racist” in nature.

At 4pm on Friday 17th, the retiring Chairman of the Evangelical Christian Church in the Land of Papua (GKI - Protestant Church) contacted me via text message. Rev Hermann Saud said BRIMOB continued to “clean” the area by targeting “Papuan”, “students” and “young people”. I am also aware this “sweeping” went on through the night and gun shots were heard to around 4am on Saturday morning.

Approximately one hour later on Friday afternoon, Rev Hermann Saud phoned me and verified his text message. He also indicated that he, along with other religious and community leaders, were waiting to meet with the Police commander and the Military commander. These people were traveling out from Jakarta. Rev Saud said these commanders must act immediately to restrain the actions of the security apparatus in Papua. This “cleaning” involved searching homes and detaining people. The police and military in Papua have a history of being particularly brutal towards detainees and forms of torture have been used in the past.

In a phone call with the newly elected Chairman of the GKI, Rev Corinus Berotabui, on Saturday afternoon 18th March, I was told another contingent of BRIMOB arrived in Jayapura early in the morning. This contingent came from Makassar. Meanwhile church and community leaders are appealing to the Indonesian Government to refrain from bringing in extra security personnel. At least one of the policemen killed on Thursday came from Makassar and there is some concern regarding retaliation. There is also concern about the development of horizontal conflict in Papua between indigenous communities and migrant communities (many of whom come from Makassar).

(4)

Rev Saud called on the Uniting Church in Australia to raise his concerns with Australian Ambassador in Jakarta with hope that the Indonesian authorities will be encouraged to act responsibly and with proper restraint.

Seventy three people have now been detained. Many more are hiding in the hills while others are in hospitals that are guarded by BRIMOB. Late this afternoon I was informed that nine year old girl was shot at Padan Bulan (opposite the university campus) yesterday. She is currently in hospital. Meanwhile armed personnel carriers are being stationed in the BRIMPOB headquarters near Abepura .

Brief Analysis

I visited Papua last week (3rd to 10th March) and spent time in Abepura, Wamena and Biak. Over the past 8 years I have visited the region on an average of one visit per year and I maintain good contact with people. This time I noted a certain subdued feeling about the place. People are now very cautious in Papua. There is little or no talk of “merdeka” (independence) and no reckless discussion about Papua’s future.

Recent events concerning what Papuans describe as the “flawed or failed” implementation of Special Autonomy, the division of Papua into two provinces (and talk about further divisions – perhaps as many as five new provinces) together with the controversy over the formation and the role of the Papua Peoples’ Assembly (MPR), has created enormous confusion and frustration in Papua.

Meanwhile, over the past six months troop numbers have increased substantially in Papua. Locals inform me they believe security numbers may be now in excess of 40,000, This is an extraordinary number. There is also considerable talk about shipments of arms from Aceh and Maluku coming into Papua.

Militarisation of the region simply makes local people more vulnerable and anxious. The rising incidence of HIV/AIDS (Papua has the highest infection rate in Indonesia) suggests the central government does not care. Indeed, there are stories going around Papua suggesting AIDS has been deliberately introduced to Papua with the purpose of wiping out the indigenous population. I am sure this is not true however such comments indicate the level of anxiety, the distinct lack of trust and the degree paranoia present among Papuans.

Increasing levels of surveillance in Papua together with the activity of Indonesia’s intelligence organisation (BIN) is creating great fear among many people. Incidents where Papuan leaders are monitored are common while clandestine threats to Papuan leaders and their families take place.

Other issues concern the ongoing flow of migrants into Papua and conservative Islamic agendas embraced in the so called “Anti Pornography Bill”. This bill (being debated in the national parliament) seeks to bring about certain strict dress codes that will impact on tribal people, particularly in Papua’s remote mountains where the penis gourd is still worn by many men. This is cultural issue and it underlines certain Indonesian attitudes to so called “primitive” Papuan cultures.

The massive Freeport Mine stands out as symbol of what is wrong for many Papuans. Freeport is seen as big money earner however local people receive few benefits. Freeport impacts on the environment while the mine also relies on the TNI (Indonesian Army) for protection. Most Papuans see this as blatant exploitation by the TNI and an opportunity to maintain a menacing presence in the region.

I believe most Papuans now feel they have their “backs to the wall”. Indigenous communities have lost so much in Papua. The vision of Papua has now been undermined with the formation of the Province of Irian Jaya Barat while the decentralization of government to the level of the “Kabupaten” (regency), together with the formation of many new “Kabupatens” has impacted in a number of ways.

Firstly there has been a significant inflow of government money to fund the establishment of new local government structures. New vehicles have been provided together with the construction of new buildings. However education and particularly health services remain very poor and even non-existent. Secondly, such radical decentralisation has the effect of channeling interests towards the local level. This means local issues become the focus. Cooperation and integration among Papuans at a higher level is threatened. The emphasis is now on preserving what was described to me as “the unique character of local communities”.

In the eyes of many Papuans, regional and provincial initiatives are clearly failing (particularly the implementation of Special Autonomy and the confusion associated with the role of the Papua People’s Assembly – MRP). People are now focused on maintaining and defending what they have left. This also means that most Papuans actually feel increasingly marginalized, disenfranchised and locked into a corner.

Students articulate this growing sense of marginalisation and being cornered. Trust in Jakarta’s reforms and faith in Indonesia’s intentions in Papua have broken down. Students and young people want to stop this increasing marginalisation and they are now very determined to make a stand. They will continue to protest over these issues. Some say the students are prepared “even for death”.

My understanding indicates most Papuans are now definitely focused on survival. Papuans want to hold onto what is left and they want to protect their interests. They want to maintain their distinctive identity in the world's largest Muslim nation and they want to live in the absence of life threatening intimidation by the security apparatus and constant surveillance by intelligence people.

Students in Abepura exercised some very poor options. Their response on 16th March was brutal against an initial small group of anti-riot police (approximately 20 officers among a crowd described as being at least 1,000). The likelihood of more violence in Papua is a real concern.

Rev Saud communicated concerns about such violence with me last week. He is very concerned about the level of anger and frustration in Papua. Rev Saud, together with many other Papuan religious and civil leaders, have worked hard to establish and maintain Papua as "a land of peace". The church is committed to this "land of peace" however further violence is a distinct possibility.

Rev Hermann Saud believes there is a need for an ongoing dialogue with the national government about Papua's present and future. Options have to be urgently sought and discussed.

Conclusion

- (a) Given the current circumstances in Papua, the likelihood for further violent reactions in the local community is a distinct possibility.
- (b) Papuans believe they have their backs to wall. Many want to hold on to and defend what they believe is all they have left.
- (c) Security forces are reacting with undue and unnecessary force. Random violence against local people is common and there is now considerable concern over the plight of those detained.
- (d) Many people are in hospitals that are guarded by BRIMOB while many others have fled to the hills. Many of these people may be injured and have no access to medical care.

(6)

- (e) Rev Saud and other church and community leaders are calling on the security apparatus to act responsibly and with restraint. Church and community leaders do not want a further increase in the numbers of security forces operating in Papua.
- (f) Rev Saud and other church and community leaders are seeking opportunities for effective, ongoing dialogue with the national government about Papua's present and its future.

Rev John Barr
Executive Secretary
Uniting International Mission
Uniting Church in Australia National Assembly
Phone 0408826742
Email: jbarr@nat.uca.org.au
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