

24th Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
NGO Side Event

“Human Rights Situation of Indigenous Peoples in West Papua”

Thursday 24th April 2025, 15:00 – 16:30

Church Center, New York

Background:

West Papua is the western half of Papua Island, which since 1969 has been included as part of Indonesia. The integration of West Papua to Indonesia was done after the “Penentuan Pendapat Rakyat /Pepera” or “Act of Free Choice” The purpose of Pepera was to determine whether the people of West Papua wanted to remain with Indonesia or become an independent nation. However, the process was heavily criticized for its lack of transparency and fairness. Only 1,025 people, selected by the Indonesian military, were allowed to vote, and they unanimously chose to remain with Indonesia. This led to widespread allegations of coercion and manipulation. Currently, the Government of Indonesia divides the administration of the region into 6 provinces: Papua; Papua Barat; Papua Tengah; Papua Pegunungan; Papua Selatan and Papua Barat Daya. Jayapura.

Introduction:

The indigenous peoples of West Papua have faced decades of political and economic conflict, which has led to numerous human rights violations. Their struggle is deeply rooted in their fight for cultural identity, land rights, and political autonomy amidst Indonesia's governance of the region. This situation has caused immense suffering, as indigenous communities grapple with the loss of their ancestral lands, marginalization in socio-economic development, and the suppression of their voices in decision-making processes. The ongoing conflict has drawn international attention, with calls for addressing the historical grievances and ensuring justice for the affected communities.

Since the last few years, the ongoing armed conflict in West Papua continued to drive severe human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and torture by security forces, particularly in the highlands. Peaceful protests were suppressed, and under the leadership of Indonesia's new government, headed by former military general Prabowo Subianto, pressures on indigenous land and cultural heritage increased. The military's involvement in securing natural resource exploitation through national projects and private investments further exacerbated the violence, leading to heightened risks for local communities. Despite significant infrastructure and resource extraction initiatives, these efforts provided little benefit to indigenous Papuans, with healthcare and education services seeing minimal improvement—especially in conflict zones where violence forced professional workers to flee.

The extraction of natural resources in West Papua has had profound impacts on human rights in the region. The Grasberg mine, one of the world's largest gold and copper mines, has been a

central point of controversy. The environmental degradation caused by mining activities has led to the destruction of river systems and the displacement of indigenous communities. The local population has faced significant health risks due to pollution and loss of traditional livelihoods, exacerbating poverty and social inequality.

Human rights abuses in West Papua are closely linked to the presence of security forces protecting mining operations. Reports indicate that the Indonesian military and police have been involved in extrajudicial killings, torture, and forced disappearances of Indigenous Papuans. The militarization of the region has created an atmosphere of fear and repression, where freedom of expression and peaceful protests are often met with violence. This has led to a cycle of conflict and human rights violations, with little accountability for the perpetrators.

The economic benefits of resource extraction in West Papua have largely bypassed the Indigenous population. Despite the wealth generated from mining, local communities have seen minimal improvements in healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Instead, they have borne the brunt of environmental destruction and human rights abuses. The lack of meaningful consultation and compensation for affected communities has fueled resentment and calls for greater autonomy and independence. The situation in West Papua highlights the need for responsible resource management that respects human rights and promotes sustainable development.

Impacts of Indonesia's National Strategic Projects (PSN) on Indigenous Papuans:

In 2016, the Government of Indonesia adopted the National Strategic Projects (Proyek Strategis Nasional – PSN) scheme as an effort to realize a just and prosperous Indonesian society based on developing physical and non-physical infrastructure that will have an important role in increasing economic growth. The scheme has been revised several times, including the latest one in 2022. Across the West Papua region, there are at least 10 PSN projects. Several environment and human rights organizations expressed their critical views on the impacts of these projects both on the environment and the rights of indigenous Papuans.

The Indonesian Forum for the Environment (WALHI) Papua expressed its concern over the impact caused by the National Strategic Project (PSN) in the Merauke and South Sorong, Keerom and Sarmi regions which has triggered prolonged conflict and further exacerbated tensions between the Papuan indigenous people and the state and companies. Large projects initiated by the Indonesian government under the pretext of economic development have actually ignored the basic rights of indigenous peoples, especially regarding the management of customary land which they have long protected and managed sustainably.

Massive development involving sectors such as agriculture (plantations), mining and infrastructure has penetrated areas that are home to local tribes in Papua, such as the Marind, Asmat, Awyu and other tribes. Customary land, which has been a source of life for Indigenous communities, both from an economic, social, cultural and spiritual perspective, is now threatened to fulfill development interests which often do not accommodate the rights of Indigenous communities and may lead to eviction.

Objectives:

- Provide a general background on the situation in West Papua
- Raise awareness on specific cases of business abuses of human rights
- Discuss strategies towards the protection of the Indigenous Peoples in West Papua

Panelists:

1. Ms. Dortehea Wabiser: Researcher, PUSAKA Foundation, Indonesia
2. Representative of PANG: Pacific Network on Globalization (PANG), Suva, Fiji – to be confirmed
3. Mr. Yan Warinussy: Lawyer, Legal Aid, Research, Investigation and Development Institute (Lembaga Penelitian, Pengkajian dan Pengembangan Bantuan Hukum, LP3BH), Papua Barat, Indonesia – invited
4. Mr. Simon Petrus Balagaise, Chair of the Kondo Digul Indigenous Peoples Forum, Merauke, Papua Selatan – invited and to be confirmed
5. UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples – to be considered
6. Representative of Human Rights Watch (tbc)
7. Representative of Permanent Mission of Marshall Islands to the UN in New York.

Co-moderators:

- Mr. Budi Tjahjono, Franciscans International
- Fr. Paul Rahmat SVD, VIVAT International

Co-Organizers:

Franciscans International
VIVAT International
Pusaka Foundation
Dewan Adat Papua (Papua Customary Council)
Alansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara
NGO Committee on Rights of Indigenous People
NGO Mining Working Group
Indigenous Peoples' Rights International