

Annexed by Indonesia in 1969: West Papua's Forgotten Struggle for Independence

Saturday 3 December 2016, by [McDERMOTT Michael](#) (Date first published: 15 September 2016).

TeleSUR spoke to Benny Wenda, an exiled West Papuan leader who explained his people's ongoing struggle for independence against Indonesia and their plans for the future.

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While today marks Papua New Guinea's Independence from Australia, West Papua, a province on the same island continues its struggle for self-governance in one of the least publicized and longest-running independence struggles in the world.

West Papuans won their independence from Dutch Colonialism in 1963 and was annexed by Indonesia in 1969 as part of a controversial referendum.

That has led to decades of tension between Indonesia, and West Papuans, who say the relationship is a neo-colonial, and fraught with violence, economic exploitation, and injustice.

Violence and Repression

"Indonesia is able to massacre my people. Almost 500, 000 men and women have been killed. While I'm speaking there are arrests and intimidations and imprisonments still going on in West Papua," said Benny Wenda, an exiled West Papuan Indigenous leader. That figure is consistent with human rights organizations' estimates.

Wenda said West Papuans essentially live in an apartheid, or a political system reminiscent of Jim Crow in the U.S. deep South. Without freedom of assembly, for instance, West Papuans cannot legally protest and organize social movements, Wenda said, and as a result, Indonesia currently detains 54 West Papuans as political prisoners. In the last three years, 27 activists had been killed, nearly half this year alone.

Wenda also mentioned Indonesian forces targeting and killing young West Papuan high school boys, almost as a preemptive strike.

"They (the protestors) just sacrifice their lives, just peacefully marching. But Indonesia, they don't like it peacefully, they want violence ... Still today, Indonesia gets away with impunity."

Wenda said that countries with their own history of racial strife-most notably the U.S. Australia and New Zealand- helped to train some of the anti-terrorist forces that have killed a number of activists.

Media Blackout

Wenda said that West Papua's struggle remained largely unknown because "for the last 50 years we have been fighting with the Indonesian government to gain our freedom, but for 50 years Indonesia has been able to ban journalists."

Journalists from the BBC and ABC Australia could only get into West Papua if they went undercover, despite Indonesia's assertion that "'we allow journalists in.'

International aid organisations such as the Red Cross and the International Peace Brigade have also been banned in the province by Indonesian authorities, said Wenda. Instead West Papuans have increasingly turned to social media to portray their struggle to the world.

From Sep. 30 to Oct. 30, "Rockin' for West Papua" will take place across Australia and the other parts of the world. Wenda said the musical event offers the movement "a weapon" to help fight Indonesian rule, "because in all parts of the world music is powerful, it can change opinions and through the music people can be inspired."

The Future Fight for Independence

West Papua independence leaders have been continually gaining support and solidarity from other nations in the region to advance the fight. "Currently our focus is targeting the pacific countries ... We hope we can do our best to mobilise globally," Wenda said

The Pacific Coalition on West Papua, was established in July and features representatives from the governments of the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tuvalu and Nauru. The Melanesian Spearhead Group has also given their support to West Papua and to a lesser extent the Pacific Island Forum.

Wenda said that he and West Papua representatives planned to travel to the United Nations general assembly later this month to raise the issue of independence.

"I am really confident that people in the Pacific-- particularly across the Micronesia, Polynesia and Melanesia -- the governments and the ordinary people are in support, including New Zealand and Australia. Ordinary people are always with us," said Wenda, referencing those two countries' support of Timor-Leste in its independence from Indonesia in 2002.

Wenda said that the West Papua fight had many things in common with other regional independence movements such as Guam and New Caledonia and even the struggles against oppression in Palestine and Western Sahara.

"I think that it is a common struggle with the same sentiment, I hope that people out there, you know the good hearted people, we need their support because this fight is a part of humanity."

Michael McDermott

P.S.

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<http://www.telesur.tv/english/opinion/West-Papuas-Forgotten-Struggle-for-Independence-20160915-0018.html>