

Banned West Papua independence petition handed to UN

Wednesday 27 September 2017, by [DOHERTY Ben](#), [LAMB Kate](#) (Date first published: 27 September 2017).

Exclusive: Document outlawed by Indonesia was ‘smuggled from one end of Papua to the other’ and signed by 70% of the population.

A petition banned by the Indonesian government, but bearing the signatures of 1.8 million West Papuans – more than 70% of the contested province’s population – has been presented to the United Nations, with a demand for a free vote on independence.

Exiled West Papuan independence campaigner Benny Wenda presented the bound petition to the UN’s decolonisation committee [\[1\]](#), the body that monitors the progress of former colonies – known as non-self-governing territories – towards independence.

The petition was banned in the provinces of Papua and West Papua by the Indonesian government, and blocked online across the country, so petition sheets had to be “smuggled from one end of Papua to the other”, Wenda told the *Guardian* from New York.

Independence campaigners have been jailed and allegedly tortured in Papua for opposing the rule of Indonesia, which has controlled Papua (now Papua and West Papua) since 1963. Those signing the petition risked arrest and jail.

“The people have risked their lives, some have been beaten up, some are in prison. In 50 years, we have never done this before, and we had to organise this in secret,” Wenda said.

“People were willing to carry it between villages, to smuggle it from one end of Papua to the other, because this petition is very significant for us in our struggle for freedom.”

The petition asks the UN to appoint a special representative to investigate human rights abuses and “put West Papua back on the decolonisation committee agenda and ensure their right to self-determination ... is respected by holding an internationally supervised vote”.

West Papua was formerly on the decolonisation committee’s agenda – which monitors progress towards decolonisation and independent rule – but was removed in 1963.

Wenda said it felt to him that West Papua’s referendum “had already happened” and that the petition was a manifestation of the people’s desire for independence.

“The people have already chosen, people have signed the petition with their blood and their thumbprint. We are optimistic, confident, that in a few years, we will have progress. This is not just an activist issue: this has gone up to government level, to diplomatic level, up to the United Nations.”

Independence activist Yanto Awerkion was jailed in June for leading a rally in support of the petition.

He remains in custody and potentially faces charges of treason.

In an interview from prison, he said: "From behind the iron bars I order and appeal to the international community and to the United Nations, please hear the voice of the West Papuan people."

'A publicity stunt'

However, Indonesian foreign ministry spokesperson Arrmanatha Nasir, accompanying the country's contingent to the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, dismissed the West Papuan petition as baseless theatrics.

"That is purely a publicity stunt with no credibility," he told the *Guardian* via a text message, "Papua is an integral part of Indonesia as provided for in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2504 (XXIV) 1969."

Indonesian President Joko Widodo has worked hard to demonstrate the central government's commitment to developing the easternmost province, prioritising infrastructure and connectivity development, and visiting more than six times since his election in 2014.

The UK's all-party parliamentary group on West Papua fully supported the petition and its push for UN action, co-chair Alex Sobel said. "This inspiring act of mass democratic expression should definitively lay to rest rhetoric from the Indonesian government that West Papuans are content being part of Indonesia," he said.

"The people of West Papua have endured over 50 years of widespread human rights violations that have been described by many as a systematic genocide. It has become clear that in an ever worsening situation, the people of West Papua are not safe under Indonesian occupation."

At the UN over the last week, support for Papuan independence has come from fellow Melanesian leaders of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. But the deputy prime minister of Caribbean nation St Vincent and the Grenadines, Louis Straker, also lent his support to the "legitimate aspiration ... for freedom" of the West Papuan people.

Indonesian-controlled Papua and West Papua form the western half of the island of New Guinea. Political control of the region has been contested for more than half a century and Indonesia has consistently been accused of gross human rights violations and violent suppression of the region's independence movement.

The people indigenous to the province are Melanesian, ethnically distinct from the rest of Indonesia and more closely linked to the people of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and New Caledonia.

Formerly the Netherlands New Guinea, Papua was retained by the Dutch after Indonesian independence in 1945 but the province was annexed by Jakarta in 1963.

Indonesia formalised its control over West Papua in 1969 when its military hand-picked 1,026 of West Papua's population and compelled them into voting in favour of Indonesian annexation under a UN-supervised process known as the Act of Free Choice.

A 2004 report by the International Human Rights Clinic at Yale Law School said: "Indonesian military leaders began making public threats against Papuan leaders ... vowing to shoot them on the spot if they did not vote for Indonesian control."

Known as Irian Jaya until 2000, it been split into two provinces, Papua and West Papua, since 2003. They have semi-autonomous status.

Many Papuans regard the Indonesian takeover as an illegal annexation and the OPM (Free Papua Movement) has led a low-level insurgency for decades. That insurgency has long been the excuse for significant military involvement in Papua.

With the heightened police and military presence, there have been reports of security force abuses including extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detention, excessive use of force and mistreatment of peaceful protesters. At least 37 Papuans remain behind bars for peaceful acts of free expression or expressing solidarity with the independence movement.

There is little independent scrutiny of the situation in West Papua, as human rights organisations and journalists are restricted from visiting.

Dr Jason MacLeod, from Sydney University's centre for peace and conflict studies, said the petition directly challenged Indonesia's legitimacy in West Papua.

"The people of West Papua have never had a chance to freely or fairly decide their political status. This is the first time they've really been able to canvas people's political views from across the territory: a huge number of people have participated in it and overwhelmingly indicated their support for the referendum."

Ben Doherty and Kate Lamb in Jakarta

P.S.

* The Guardian. Wednesday 27 September 2017 06.00 BST Last modified on Wednesday 27 September 2017 06.01 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/27/banned-west-papua-independence-petition-un>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.un.org/en/decolonization/index.shtml>