

New Zealand's disgraceful role in the 'slow genocide' of West Papua

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A new study by human rights activist Maire Leadbeater looks at New Zealand's reluctance to do anything to halt the crimes against humanity in our Pacific neighbor, West Papua.

A few years ago I wrote about New Zealand's betrayal of the people of East Timor during the 24 years they suffered under brutal military rule from Indonesia. The records show that the New Zealand government was well-informed about the violence and repression which marked Indonesian rule but chose not to take a stand for fear of disrupting good relations with Indonesia.

West Papua's Melanesian people are also denied genuine self-determination. New Zealand is repeating the same mistakes, pursuing an unethical foreign policy that has had tragic consequences for the West Papuan people. The situation could not be more critical. Academic research backs the West Papuan claim that the indigenous population is facing "slow genocide". The New Zealand government is under pressure to change direction. But much more is needed.

West Papua was "gifted" to Indonesia while President Sukarno was at the helm. Suharto's regime, aided and abetted by the West, perpetrated one of the twentieth century's worst massacres, systematically eliminating anyone believed to have communist sympathies. Indonesia was opened up to foreign investment and adopted Western-friendly foreign and defence policies. Rich prizes awaited US corporations, not least among them the gold and copper in the mountainous interior of West Papua.

New Zealand politicians and diplomats welcomed Indonesia's change in direction. Cold war anti-communist fervour trumped sympathy for the victims of the purge; and New Zealand was keen to increase its trade, investment and defence ties with the "new" Indonesia.

None of this was good news for the people of West Papua. A feisty resistance movement had developed, but in 1969 Indonesia managed to pass off a fraudulent Act of Free Choice as meeting the self-determination requirement in the 1962 agreement. New Zealand officials knew from first-hand experience that the West Papuans had been coerced but chose to stand with Indonesia when the United Nations sanctioned the outcome. In the 1960s a grouping of recently independent African nations did their best to stand up for West Papuan rights. They were no match for Jakarta's backers, who included not only Western nations but also Indonesia's conservative Asian neighbours.

New Zealand adopted a policy setting that endorsed Indonesia's territorial integrity as sacrosanct. West Papua slipped beneath the media radar and few challenged the government's decision to turn away. The human rights discourse about Indonesia focused on its shocking record of detaining political opponents and suspected communists and on the unfolding tragedy in East Timor.

This official complacency was challenged from time to time when coordinated campaigns showed that the resistance had never given up. In 1977 there was a sabotage campaign against the Freeport-McMoRan mine, followed by Indonesian retaliation; and in 1984 there was a flood of

refugees into Papua New Guinea, prompted by another Indonesian crackdown.

When Suharto's dictatorial regime fell in 1998, West Papuans dared to hope for change. Civil resistance and international diplomacy began to take the place of armed struggle. In New Zealand, civil society started taking greater notice of the situation, and there was a brief moment when it seemed our government might amend its "Indonesia first" policy.

In the last decade there has been an avalanche of documentation of crimes against humanity committed in West Papua over the past half century. This includes documenting the inward flow of migrants. West Papua's diplomatic struggle has borne fruit with the grassroots or "taro roots" movements around the Pacific region who are calling for West Papua to be brought back into the Pacific family. A number of Pacific governments have taken up the cause and made strong representations at the UN General Assembly. New Zealand has so far refused to be part of this advocacy.

It's common to hear people remark that New Zealand doesn't speak out on human rights in West Papua because of trade concerns. Indonesia is a valued trading partner, but that's not the full story. New Zealand makes important foreign policy decisions in consultation with its friends; diplomats are constantly exchanging information, analyses and reports with their counterparts in Washington, London, Canberra and Ottawa. Some of this sharing is revealed in declassified documentation, but it's the tip of the iceberg.

We are a tag-along nation - a habit formed when we were tied to the apron-strings of mother England. The Second World War and the rise of the global influence of the United States modified, but did not change, the pattern. The cold war anti-communist pacts such as ANZUS and SEATO are no more, but their traces remain in extensive arrangements for defence cooperation, military exercises and in deployments to theatres of conflict. New Zealand is a member of the secretive UKUSA Agreement, known as Five Eyes, along-side Canada, Australia, Britain and the United States; UKUSA, the world's preeminent signals intelligence collection network, has been around since 1946.

However, New Zealand has gone against the flow with its position on nuclear weapons: most notably, it enacted nuclear-free legislation and insisted on banning all visiting nuclear-powered or nuclear weapons-capable vessels. New Zealand was the only Western aligned country to take such an unequivocal stand that challenged the United States' neither-confirm-nor-deny policy. In 1997 New Zealand also played an important role in helping to broker peace between the warring parties in the long-running conflict in Bougainville.

There have been glimmers of hope that New Zealand might move independently of its allies and give some support for West Papuan self-determination. There was a short-lived initiative sponsored by Prime Minister Walter Nash in 1960, and Foreign Minister Phil Goff made a tentative mediation offer in the early 2000s. Papuans continue to raise the possibility that New Zealand could serve as mediator in a dialogue with the Indonesian government.

Many people thought the New Zealand government would never change direction and support self-determination for East Timor - but it did happen. It must happen for West Papua too.

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