

West Papuans: ‘Veronica Koman is us’

Friday 23 October 2020, by [PRICE Susan](#) (Date first published: 23 September 2020).

The Ebamukai Solidarity Team for Indonesian human rights lawyer Veronica Koman repaid her scholarship to the Indonesian government on September 16.

Koman has been [living in exile in Australia](#) since last year. She has played a critical role in documenting Indonesian human rights abuses against West Papuans. The Indonesian government is trying to disrupt her efforts to alert the international community to the brutality of its occupation.

Koman’s scholarship was withdrawn by the Indonesian Ministry of Finance in August, to punish her for human rights work in support of West Papua. The funds were raised through donations from the West Papuan people and an international crowdfunding campaign.

Former political prisoners Ambrosius Mulait and Dano Tabuni and lawyer Michael Himan returned the funds, along with an Indonesian flag and a copy of the West Papuan Special Autonomy Law to the ministry building in Jakarta.

The sum of Rp 1 million in Special Autonomy funds was also handed over in small notes.

The flag, document and funds constituted a symbolic handing-back to the Indonesian government of West Papua’s Special Autonomy status and funds, seen as a strategy to deny West Papuans’ right to self-determination.

The solidarity team had requested a meeting with representatives of the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) to return the funds, but received no reply. When they arrived at the LPDP office, it had closed its doors, forcing them to proceed to the Ministry of Finance.

There, security guards and police closed the gate and said there was no one in the building.

The team then proceeded to the Coordinating Legal, Political and Security Affairs Ministry and asked that the scholarship, flag, document and funds be delivered to the Minister.

On hearing that the Indonesian government had ordered Koman to repay Rp 773,876,918 (about A\$73,000) to pressure her to return to Indonesia, where she would face arrest, the people of West Papua immediately started fundraising, setting up collection points at markets, roadsides and online.

The fundraising effort continued despite police forcibly dispersing fundraisers in Nabire and Jayapura, in West Papua.

Koman has received support from local and international figures, including Noam Chomsky, one of the founders of International Academics for West Papua.

In Jayapura, Mama Yosepha Alomang, West Papuan indigenous leader and environmental activist, said: “For 57 years Indonesia has taken from West Papua, consuming my body.

“You took my gold from the Nemangkawi (the sacred mountain mined by Freeport) to send

thousands of your children to school. I never asked you to return it.

“Now I touch my head and thank all West Papuan people, my children everywhere who have opened their hearts, eyes, and wallets to help Child Vero [Koman].

“Do not give up, keep fighting to defend my and West Papuan people’s dignity.”

Executive Director of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) Markus Haluk said: “The West Papuan nation has dignity. Veronica Koman has sacrificed to defend West Papuan people’s dignity and pride. Amid the hardship, we have proven this month that we can stand together to defend her.

“We will keep our unity and solidarity that we show today until we reclaim the West Papuan nation’s dignity and political rights. We appreciate and thank everyone who has joined in solidarity.”

Victor Mambor, senior journalist for the Jubi Association, who collated the funds raised, said donations ranged in size “from ten thousand to tens of millions of rupiah”.

Ronny Kareni, a West Papuan activist who initiated the international crowd-funding campaign from his home in Australia, said: “Veronica Koman is us. Her resilient character in exposing the truth about the Indonesian State’s atrocious human rights behaviour is deeply admired by many Papuans.

“Although it comes at a personal and professional cost, she is a living testament to the concerns held by many progressive Indonesians, and can teach [Indonesian President] Jokowi’s administration how to be the voice of the voiceless people.”

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