

Indonesia's Imperial Highway in West Papua

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Indonesia's planned Trans-Papua highway will facilitate easier exploitation of West Papua's resources by the occupying Indonesian regime - and more violence against the West Papuan people who resist it.

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In September of last year, labourers returning to work on the Trans-Papua highway found that much of their heavy equipment had been destroyed overnight. As a result, construction was briefly stopped on a stretch of road traversing the Bintang mountains, close to the border with Papua New Guinea. Additional troops were sent to the area, along with other road construction sites considered vulnerable by the Indonesian military. Such temporary disruptions—and subsequent military escalations—have become commonplace along the highway, which snakes over 4000 kilometres, tracing the entirety of occupied West Papua.

West Papua's six-decade long occupation is perhaps best understood as a vestige of a previous era. After Indonesia won its independence from the Netherlands in 1949, its founding President Sukarno—a towering figure of the age of decolonisation—moved to claim West Papua for Jakarta. But the Dutch were unwilling to fully relinquish their foothold in Southeast Asia, and held onto what was then Western New Guinea for thirteen years. Under pressure from the US, who felt conflict in West Papua would alienate pro-Western elements they were cultivating within the Indonesian military, the Netherlands ultimately authorised West Papua's handover in 1963; its integration into Indonesia was ratified six years later by a sham UN referendum that saw roughly 1000 handpicked Papuans intimidated into voting unanimously against independence.

A genuine independence referendum remains the ambition of all strands of West Papua's anti-colonial resistance, which has seen many of its leaders forced into exile in Australia and the UK. This multifaceted struggle recently flowered into a fully-fledged government-in-waiting, the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP), led by Interim President Benny Wenda, who has lived in the UK since 2002 after escaping imprisonment in Indonesia. Wenda often speaks of the injustice of the 1969 referendum, and has gone to great lengths to demonstrate West Papuans' desire for *merdeka*, or national liberation. In 2017, he presented a mammoth pro-independence petition signed by over 1.8 million West Papuans—close to three quarters of the indigenous population—to the UN, where it was rebuffed by reference to Indonesia's '[territorial integrity](#)'.

If Indonesia's invasion of West Papua was driven by Sukarno's desire to unify all former Dutch territory, the brutality with which they maintain control has a more prosaic explanation. West Papua is rich; not by ordinary metrics—it is Indonesia's most deprived region—but in its welter of plant and animal life, and its vast reserves of gold, silver, nickel, copper, oil, and gas. The Trans-Papua highway, over nine tenths of which has now been built, aims to expand access to these reserves by

connecting up Indonesia's largest industrial developments, mostly in mining and agribusiness. Elected on a reforming platform, Indonesia's current President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo has significantly accelerated construction.

Easing Extraction

Once complete, the highway will stretch from Sorong, Papua's westernmost city, to southeastern Merauke, in the process linking the regional capital Jayapura, the mining town Timika, and the gas-rich Bintuni Bay. Merauke's position as the highway's eastern terminus isn't accidental. Abundant in arable land, Jakarta intends it to become Indonesia's 'breadbasket', with a state-backed, corporate-led [agricultural project](#) rapidly converting its peatlands and pristine rainforest into huge monoculture plantations.

While the majority of Papuans practice small-scale subsistence farming, industrial agriculture in West Papua is dominated by palm oil. Indonesia is the global epicentre of this notoriously rapacious industry, which chokes biodiversity and poisons ecosystems while stripping away indigenous land. With palm oil having destroyed much of Indonesia's great forests in [Kalimantan](#) and Sumatra, West Papua—home to one of the world's largest remaining rainforests—has emerged as a new frontier. [Researchers estimate](#) that it will lose thirteen percent of its forest by 2036, as new developments extend out from the edges of the highway.

For Papuans, the process of development is experienced as a violent and traumatic dispossession. While Indonesia does have laws protecting indigenous land tenure, in reality Papuans are almost never compensated for their land, nor given a choice over whether to leave in the first place. Of the 54,000 miles of customary land claims Indonesia had under review in 2019, virtually none were in West Papua. In some cases, courts have required written proof of ownership, ignoring that tribal land tenure is transferred primarily via abstract bonds of kinship. In others, land along the highway has been illegally cleared by slash-and-burn farming, blanketing the surrounding area in a lethal haze.

Papuans living near development sites bear the brunt of environmental degradation—always the companion of deforestation—and are forced to contend with acidic runoff and pesticide pollution that seeps into rivers and leaves fish species 'drunk on poison'. The coming flurry of development will further expose West Papua's variegated wildlife to what William Laurance, an academic who has worked extensively on the highway's environmental impact, calls 'a Pandora's Box of environmental threats', including habitat fragmentation, illicit mining, poaching, and wildfires.

Though palm oil is behind the majority of Indonesia's current land-grabs, it is industrial mining that most defines the occupation of West Papua. The world's largest gold and second-largest copper mine, Grasberg, is the most significant of the mines that dot the Papuan landscape. Operated by American company Freeport McMoRan, Grasberg has been central to Indonesia's finances since it came on tap. Freeport is Indonesia's largest taxpayer, and Grasberg's opening drove a significant increase in the country's economic fortunes, to the extent that during Indonesia's years of dictatorship West Papua provided forty percent of national revenue. The highway's winding course through West Papua's rugged central highlands will facilitate the creation of new Grasbergs; as Benny Wenda puts it, 'from Sorong to the border there is gold in every mountain'.

Construction is currently underway on a vast new gold mine, Wabu Block, which sprawls across appropriated tribal farmland and hunting grounds. Once completed, it will be the size of Jakarta. A recent [Amnesty report](#) into Wabu Block's construction observed a significant increase in human rights abuses in the surrounding area, including the extrajudicial killings of at least twelve Papuans.

Such abuses neatly illustrate the dynamic between economic development and militarisation in West Papua—as does the list of investors in Wabu Block, which includes retired generals like Luhut Pandjaitan, now Minister for Maritime Affairs, along with other prominent military figures.

Military Occupation

Along with easing the transportation of goods out of remote regions, the highway is bringing increasing numbers of Indonesian troops into these areas. The situation in Nduga regency, in West Papua's highlands, is instructive as to the effects of intensified military occupation. Long a bastion of pro-independence activity, Nduga has been at the centre of Papuan resistance to the highway's construction. Civilians there have pursued a strategy of mass non-cooperation, refusing aid and schooling provided by the military, and Indonesian forces are regularly assailed by the TPN-PB, West Papua's most prominent armed independence group.

Nduga has existed in a state of perpetual siege since late 2018, when a local TPN-PB battalion [killed twenty](#) Indonesian soldiers and road-workers they had caught filming a clandestine flag-raising protest. In his 2020 book about the highway, *The Road*, Australian journalist John Martinkus describes military helicopters strafing the highlands, dropping white phosphorus bomblets—chemical weapons banned under international law—on the population below. In the last three years, over 45,000 Nduga people have been internally displaced by repeated military operations—a remarkable figure in a regency with a population little over twice that size.

The ethnic cleansing of rural West Papua—often prompted by fake TPN-PB attacks the Indonesian military has staged on its own officers—is best understood as a military and economic strategy; one that was trialled in Nduga, and has now begun to spill over into neighbouring regencies like [Maybrat and Intan Jaya](#). As much as it is a piece of capitalist infrastructure—a means of smoothing the process of extraction—the Trans-Papua highway is also a tool of occupation, enabling nimbler and more extensive military control. As Wenda puts it, 'You cannot separate business and military in West Papua. Military operations are partly there to clear the people—if they can get them away from their villages, they can get to the gold.' In this respect, the highway—construction on which has been overseen by the military since the 2018 Nduga attack—is just the latest element in an elaborate security apparatus that has made West Papuans some of the most intensely surveilled people on earth.

Key elements of Papuans' national and cultural Melanesian identity, such as [growing dreadlocks](#) or raising the national flag, the Morning Star, have been criminalised. Internet and phone coverage is heavily monitored, and subject to abrupt blackouts, as happened during the [2019 Papuan uprising](#). Extrajudicial killings are commonplace, along with arbitrary arrests, sometimes on the basis of chants or text messages critical of the occupying regime. The case of activist [Victor Yeimo](#) is instructive: he faces life in prison on treason charges for calling for an independence referendum during a peaceful protest. Online, Indonesia marshals a ['bot army'](#) that spreads misinformation and promotes a counterfeit 'moderate' Papuan identity opposed to independence.

Perhaps the most effective method of colonial control, however, has been the transmigration programme, which relocated 300,000 Indonesians—mostly poor, landless peasants—to West Papua during Suharto's dictatorship. Transmigration was a settler-colonial policy, aiming, as Papua's then-governor put it at the time, to secure enough 'straight haired' settlers to supplant the 'curly haired' indigenous Papuans. Though this particular programme stopped operating after Indonesia's liberalisation in the late 1990s, state-sponsored transmigration [continues unabated](#), and new economic ventures attract a steady stream of colonists. The result is that in urban areas like the

regional capital Jayapura, Papuans are now a minority.

For West Papuan Freedom

While transmigration was partly intended to replace Papuan labour, by targeting restive, rural areas, it also aimed to quiet Papuan resistance. The Trans-Papua highway is similarly driven by the interlinking logics of extraction and control. These dual logics have endured across successive Indonesian administrations, led by dictators and reformers alike.

On his regular visits to West Papua, Jokowi talks often of economic development, extolling the jobs and infrastructure the highway is bringing to an impoverished region. In a sense he is right; the highway has indeed created new jobs. Straight-haired transmigrants are given well-paid positions in logging and construction, while curly-haired Papuans, deprived of their traditional hunting grounds, often turn to the informal economy, pilfering timber or panning for gold in the hinterlands of large mines. Under Jokowi, 'development' has become the standard ideological justification for Indonesian colonialism.

Though this approach may be different to the naked racism that sees Papuans as '[monkeys](#)', the underlying laws of motion are the same. Indonesia might no longer be a dictatorship, but it is still a colonial regime, trapped on the periphery of global capitalism, and ineluctably dependent on West Papua's resources for its own renewal. This [genocidal](#) dynamic will continue as long as the occupation does. As Wenda says, 'West Papua doesn't need development; it needs freedom.'

Douglas Gerrard

P.S.

- Tribune. 07.06.2022:
<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2022/06/indonesia-trans-papua-highway-west-papua-utmwp>
- Douglas Gerrard is a writer and researcher based in London.