

OPEN LETTER

West Papua Action Aotearoa
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12 June 2020
Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern
Prime Minister

Hon Winston Peters
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Parliament Buildings
Wellington

Dear Jacinda Ardern and Winston Peters

We urge you to raise New Zealand's voice to help prevent a travesty of justice and honour the indigenous people of West Papua who are courageously fighting a "Papuan lives matter" campaign.

The most urgent call is to back the global campaign for for the immediate release of the 'Balikpapan Seven' who face the possibility of being put away for years because they stood up to racism. The seven are indigenous activists and students and they are being tried for their involvement in antiracism protests in Jayapura, West Papua, in August 2019. Unbelievably prosecutors are seeking between five and 17 years of prison, despite the fact that none were involved in any violence. They are on trial for 'treason' in a court in Kalimantan, thousands of kilometers from their homes and families. They were transferred to this distant jurisdiction for 'security reasons'.

The call for the release of the 'Balikpapan Seven' has the outspoken support of a large number of Papuan politicians, civic leaders, and religious clerics. Church leaders, student unions, and Indonesian and international human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch have also criticized the government's harsh actions. The parallels with events in the United States are obvious and Indonesia should realize that they are now on notice for failing to uphold the rights of Papuan people to freedom from discrimination and freedom of expression.

On August 17 last year a West Papuan 'Black Lives Matter'/'Papuan Lives Matter' uprising was triggered by a racist attack undertaken by Indonesian militia and army officers on a West Papuan student dormitory in Surabaya. The violence against the students was documented in videos that showed some Indonesian soldiers repeatedly banging on gates of the dormitory while shouting words such as 'monkeys' and 'dogs' while hurling stones and firing teargas canisters. The military responsible for the violent siege on the Papuan students' dormitory in Surabaya last August have escaped sanction. Only three civilians who took part in the siege got light sentences. But dozens of those involved in the ensuing protests which swept across Indonesia and West Papua were arrested. Those seen as responsible for organising the protests were detained and charged with treason. A number of these leaders have now been released after serving months' long sentences, so it is confounding that the 'Balikpapan Seven' should be facing such extreme penalties.

The defendants are: Buchtar Tabuni, a leader of the pro-Papuan independence group United Liberation Movement for West Papua (prosecutors are seeking a 17-year prison term); Agus Kossay and Stevanus Itlay from the National Committee of West Papua (Komite Nasional Papua Barat) (15 years); Ferry Gombo, Cenderawasih University student union head, and Alexander Gobai, Jayapura University of Science and Technology (USTJ) student union head (10 years); and Irwanus Uropmabin and Hengki Hilapok, USTJ students (5 years), who were helping Gobai to rent a truck and sound system for the protest.

Buchtar Tabuni has been a leading activist for over a decade – this is his third time of imprisonment including a three year jail term for ‘treason’ following a peaceful independence gathering on December 1, 2008. Stevanus Itlay has also been jailed twice previously, the last time for organizing a prayer meeting.

Indonesia’s response to last year’s uprising was to crack down and to send in more more than 10,000 additional security personnel to West Papua. The internet was shut down – an action considered unlawful by Indonesia’s State Administrative Court. At least 61 lives, including police and migrants were lost during the uprising.

The litany of abuses of the Papuan people stretches back over more than half a century since Papuans were forced to accept Indonesian rule. Indonesia’s own National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) notes that in 2019 there were as many as 154 complaints of violence on the part of Security forces, more than two times the figure in 2018.

Please call for the release of ‘Balikpapan Seven’ – an essential first step towards redress.

Yours sincerely,

Catherine Delahunty
Maire Leadbeater
Brian Turner