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# **Australia trained Indonesian police officer accused of West Papua violence**

by [Marni Cordell](#)

West Papuan independence activist Charles Sraun in Merauke, West Papua. Photograph: Antonius Kundumuya/The Guardian

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Charles Sraun was chatting with five friends at a house in Merauke, the easternmost city of the disputed Indonesian territory of [West Papua](#), when police stormed the building.

The 39-year-old health worker says he and his friends, all members of a pro-independence organisation called the National Committee for West Papua, were beaten with batons, made to lie face down and some forced to undress, before being cable-tied and bundled into the back of a vehicle belonging to the Indonesian paramilitary police unit, Brimob.

When questioned later about the alleged mistreatment, the officer in charge of the operation, the Merauke police chief Untung Sangaji, reportedly told local media: “In future if there are further acts of treason I will shoot them in the legs ... They have insulted the Indonesian nation. Never mind mistreatment, I will shoot them dead if ordered to shoot them ... If necessary, we will chop them up.”

When the six were locked up in a police cell later that day, it was clear to Sraun that one of them, Kristian Yandun, was badly injured.

“[The police] beat Kristian around the head and throat and on his back,” Sraun alleges. “He was already a bit unwell before the arrest - he had a cough, but it was kind of OK. But after the arrest and after the beating ... his condition became really serious.”

The group would be joined that night on 13 December last year by eight more of their colleagues, who were hauled into an adjoining cell. One man was later let off but the remaining 13 were charged with treason and would not be released until April this year when, according to their lawyer, the police did not have enough evidence to progress the case.

But by that point, Yandun was dead.



'Friends like Kristian are hard to find': Charles Sraun holds up a photo of Kristian Yandun. Photograph: Antonius Kundumuya/The Guardian

## A close relationship with Australia

Untung Sangaji was involved in another, more widely reported, police controversy. In 2018, the Indonesian National Commission on Human Rights condemned the violent and humiliating **arrests** of 12 transgender women in the province of Aceh, saying that Indonesian and Sharia police had acted outside the law and their actions were inhumane.

Aceh has its own strict Islamic laws and the arrests occurred amid a broader crackdown on the LGBT community in Indonesia. Sangaji was a local police chief at the time and, according to reports, police in his team cut the women's hair in public, forced them to wear men's clothes and coached them to behave like "real men".

"We held them for three days to give them guidance," he was reported as saying at the time. "I saw them last night and they were all able to behave well like 'normal' men." He later apologised if his actions had caused offence.

Sangaji is also one of thousands of Indonesian police who have been given training through the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC) in Semarang, which is jointly funded and run by Australia.

In June, the police chief told the Guardian in a phone interview from Merauke, where he took up the post last year, that he undertook anti-people smuggling

training at JCLEC “five or six years ago”, and was called back a few years later to study surveillance techniques. The people-smuggling session was taught by Australian Federal Police officers alongside trainers from the US and UK, he said. Afterwards, “all the foreigners exchanged phone numbers [with us] so we could stay in touch”.

JCLEC was established in 2004, as part of a push for a closer relationship between Australian and Indonesian police in the wake of the 2002 Bali bombings, which killed 88 Australians.

The centre teaches best practice counter-terrorism and counter-people smuggling techniques to Indonesia's national police, and is designed so that visiting international officers can stay in close quarters with their local counterparts - sharing meals in the communal canteen, working out together at the gym and lap pool on the centre's lush grounds.

Sangaji told the Guardian: "We continue to work really closely with the AFP. We have their phone numbers. If they are following a people-smuggling suspect, they call us and we know we have to take the call."

A spokesperson for the AFP confirmed the two forces partner "on a number of strategic, operational and capacity-building measures".

In many ways, the close working relationship has been a tactical and political success. Without Indonesia's cooperation, it's doubtful Scott Morrison would be able to lay claim to "stopping the boats". And there have been fewer large-scale terror attacks in Indonesia in recent years, largely thanks to another joint Australian initiative: the lethal paramilitary counter-terrorism force, Detachment 88.

But human rights advocates say it comes at a huge cost to those who still live under the heavy hand of Indonesian state repression, and that there has been little to no condemnation from Australia when the same officers who rub shoulders with AFP trainers at JCLEC are accused of mistreating and arbitrarily detaining peaceful civil rights and independence advocates in West Papua.

"West Papuans tell us again and again that the Indonesian police do not keep them safe - and the evidence bears this out," says Jason McLeod, co-founder of the international Make West Papua Safe campaign. "By providing training without oversight, the AFP risks making the Indonesian police even more effective human rights abusers."

"This is a really, really dark period for us," Sraun tells the Guardian from his home in Merauke. "We can be arrested and detained just for a Facebook status. The repression really feels very harsh in these times."

## **'The police chief was angry'**

Indonesia officially acquired West Papua, a former Dutch colony, in 1969, after a sham ballot on independence in which indigenous leaders were forced at gunpoint to vote for integration with their powerful neighbour. Most West Papuans continue to demand a real vote on self-determination to this day.

The organisation Sraun belongs to, the National Committee for West Papua, or KNPB, says it is firmly pro-independence but also committed to non-violence. It's a civil society organisation that is most comparable in the Australian context to a trade union, according to advocates.

“There was nothing out of the ordinary in what we were doing that day,” Sraun says. “We were simply holding a discussion, which is something we did frequently.”

Indonesian police officer Untung Sangaji. Photograph: Phil Hemingway/ABC

According to those who have followed his career, Sangaji has made it a personal mission to convert so-called separatists in West Papua, including by attempting to give gifts to KNPB members. In December last year, he told local media: “I even went down to [the KNPB members’] house and saw that many things were lacking, ranging from kitchen utensils to household furniture, including beds.” He reportedly bought some of the items and took them to the house, but they refused to take them.

While Sraun and his friends were in custody, Sangaji tried to persuade them to sign a statement of loyalty to the Republic of Indonesia. One of the detained group’s lawyers, Latifah Anum Siregar, says the police chief was prepared to make a deal if they agreed to pledge their allegiance to the state.

“There was to be a procession, covered by the media and then they would be released,” she says. “But they refused. The police chief was angry with them.”

Sangaji was quoted at the time as saying: “We have given them an opportunity to return to the Republic of Indonesia by signing a statement, but they didn’t want to... There’s no way we can just let it go [or] later, I will be the one who will be tried by the state, [and] that would be even more dangerous.

“If they want to be out of line, go ahead. But don’t be so out of line as to oppose the government ... While we are striving for the good of society, but they are making propaganda for division, I will oppose it.”

## **Yandun’s condition gets worse**

Locked up in the Merauke police cells, Yandun’s condition began to deteriorate, according to Siregar and Sraun. His lawyers and fellow detainees say they tried several times to get him medical attention. While the exact nature of his injuries or illness remains unclear, his cellmates reported that he was vomiting and having convulsions.

Some two months after he was detained, a weak and underweight Yandun was taken to hospital in February this year.

“We met the doctor who treated Kristian [who told us] that he had lost consciousness, he had not yet received intensive treatment,” says Siregar. “Some time after that, he died.”

The cause of Yandun’s death - and the extent to which his detention or alleged mistreatment by police may or may not have contributed to it - is unclear.

Sangaji did not respond to the Guardian’s questions about the arrest of the group, or about Yandun’s medical treatment or death, which he has previously reportedly denied was the result of ill treatment, claiming Yandun died in hospital from a congenital disease after receiving treatment there for several weeks. He has previously told local media that claims of detainees’ ill treatment were a hoax, and that KNPB members were arrested because they “were treasonous” and had “spread propaganda” about West Papuan independence.

Veronica Koman is an Indonesian human rights activist and lawyer living in exile in Sydney. Photograph: Carly Earl/The Guardian

## **‘The world doesn’t notice’**

“West Papua is at its worst since the Suharto era, and somehow the world just doesn’t notice,” says Veronica Koman, an Indonesian human rights lawyer who lives in exile in Sydney.

A crackdown by Indonesian security forces on the armed wing of the independence movement has forced thousands of people into hiding in the central highlands. Internet and mobile phone coverage has been intermittently cut off, meaning advocates like Koman can’t get reliable information out.

“There are at least 60,000 internally displaced people right now in West Papua,” she says. “They are mostly undocumented and in the jungle, facing malnutrition, hunger, sickness. [Just recently] a two-year-old boy died.

“It’s very striking how much the Indonesian government controls what the world knows about what’s going on in West Papua.”

Koman first came to Australia in 2016 to do a master of law at the Australian National University, but is now based in Sydney more permanently after becoming a [target of the Indonesian authorities](#) for her work in disseminating evidence of police and military-backed violence in West Papua.



The West Papuan highlands, where thousands have been driven by an Indonesian army crackdown. Photograph: Jono van Hest/Make West Papua Safe collection

She believes she would be assassinated if she went home to Jakarta to visit her elderly parents, who were recently diagnosed with Covid-19. “If I was just detained, it would cause months of bad press [in Indonesia],” she says. “But if they killed me, it would just be a few weeks and then die down.”

Her fears might sound shocking, but they are well-founded, according to advocates. Indonesian security forces have previously been accused of involvement in the deaths of [vocal opponents](#).

Koman says the Indonesian government’s [April decree](#) that all armed West Papuan independence activists are to be considered “terrorists” has only upped the ante in the troubled province.

“Jakarta is declaring war in West Papua,” she says. “Already many Papuan civilians accused of being freedom fighters are killed by the military. Now, Indonesian forces have a new licence to kill them - as terrorists.”

## **Inside JCLEC**

The lush grounds of the JCLEC, where visiting international trainers can rub shoulders with Indonesian national police officers. Photograph: Marni Cordell/The Guardian

In a fiery Senate estimates session in the Australian parliament in May, Greens senator Janet Rice grilled the AFP on who is trained at the prestigious Australian-sponsored centre.

She asked if the federal police screened participants to ensure they hadn't committed human rights violations.

She also asked whether five individual Indonesian national police officers, including Sangaji, had trained at the centre and was told the federal police had "no records" of them undertaking AFP-sponsored training.

(A spokesperson for the AFP later told the Guardian the AFP does not hold records of any individuals who have undertaken training at the centre. The centre is "an independent Indonesian institution operating under Indonesian law", the spokesperson said.)

The AFP's chief operating officer, Charlotte Tressler, told Rice in the estimates hearing that the AFP does not conduct security vetting of JCLEC participants, but added: "If we were aware that any individuals had committed any human rights violations, we would not accept them on to the course."

When the Guardian asked the AFP whether the allegations of violent arrests in Merauke constituted reason enough to ban Sangaji from further AFP-sponsored

training at the centre, we were told that participation was “determined by the host country that sponsors or delivers the activity through the JCLEC platform. However, if the Australian Federal police was to become aware of evidence of human rights abuses ... by participants on AFP-sponsored programs, the AFP may petition for them to be removed.”

Rice told the Guardian: “It is unconscionable that Australia is turning a blind eye to police who have been accused of human rights violations participating in AFP-sponsored training programs at JCLEC. Untung Sangaji said he’s undertaken training run by AFP officers and still works closely with the AFP; that’s our police force directly educating a cop who’s reportedly threatened to ‘chop [people] up’.

“If the Morrison government and the AFP do not act swiftly to investigate these claims against Sangaji, it will confirm our government’s complete disregard for human rights.”

The minister for home affairs, Karen Andrews, declined to comment.

## **A culture of impunity**

Jason McLeod has been following the conflict for 30 years.

The Australian academic says groups such as [Amnesty International](#) have found that despite significant reforms to both the police and military, the Indonesian security forces are still responsible for many human rights violations in West Papua. This includes excessive use of force during peaceful pro-independence protests and non-political gatherings. But when perpetrators are identified - which is not often - very little, if anything, happens.

“This kind of impunity is widespread in West Papua,” he says. “We’re not seeing police officers held to account. And in some instances, some of them even get promoted.”

Police arrest attendees of the Third Papuan People's Congress in Abepura in 2011. Photograph: Reuters

McLeod believes the close relationship with Australian police that is fostered through joint operations and training at JCLEC “is reinforcing that culture of impunity” by effectively providing international backing and support to some of Indonesia’s alleged police offenders.

The Indonesian national police did not respond to questions from the Guardian.

The Make West Papua Safe campaign is calling for screening of all JCLEC participants, independent monitoring of the impact of the training, and binding policy to ensure the AFP avoids complicity in human rights violations.

“We don’t oppose the training of the Indonesian national police,” says McLeod. “Law enforcement cooperation to stop organised crime and terrorism is important for all of us. We simply want to ensure the training does not create more effective human rights abusers in West Papua.”

Veronica Koman’s family were recently visited by plainclothes security officers in an act of intimidation she believes was aimed squarely at her. Her parents have urged her to stop her advocacy work.

“Earlier this year ... I think I got burnt out by this humanitarian crisis,” she says. “I felt horrible, powerless and like I’m not changing anything so what the fuck am I doing?”

It was Yandun’s death, after she tried desperately from Australia to help organise medical assistance for him, that tipped her over the edge, she says.

“I sort of got a little bit emotionally attached with Kristian so that I got very ... it was very painful for me when he died.”

The house where Yandun and Sraun were arrested and allegedly beaten was the KNPB’s informal headquarters but it was also Kristian’s home, Sraun says. At 39, he did not have a partner and lived alone. His parents and a number of siblings had died when he was younger, so the KNPB had become like family.

“We really feel his loss,” Sraun tells the Guardian, his voice cracking. “Friends like Kristian are hard to find.

“It makes us feel really determined to pursue our goals, determined to keep working until we achieve a referendum, because that’s what he worked on with us.

“Now, working towards that goal is also a way to honour and remember him.”

*Translation by Zelda Grimshaw*

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