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25th October, 2002.

SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE
DEFENCE AND TRADE

FOREIGN AFFAIRS SUB-COMMITTEE

The people of West Papua have experienced a very mixed history since their country was taken over by the armed forces of the Republic of Indonesia in 1961. The so-called "Active Free Choice" and the annexation of the territory of West Papua saw the growth of some few blessings in the way of the delivery of social services, some roads and such like. It also saw the demonstrable suppression of much of indigenous culture, the imposition of a foreign language and a social history and of cultural ways that although useful, are still foreign.

The West Papuans are a Melanesian people. Through this annexation they have been separated in many ways from the world of Melanesia and drawn into the foreign conglomeration of south-east Asia.

The people have been given no real or genuine political opportunity to express their collective will about their present imposed status and condition. Nor have they been permitted the opportunity to determine the shape of their future.

There are many signs of the presence and activities of increasing Indonesian armed forces in the area – for little purpose other than the suppression, often violent, of any opposition to the status quo in the territory. Those same armed forces have lost claim to honour and respect since their repressive and cruel activities in East Timor until 1999 and their continuing activities in other parts of the Republic, against their fellow Indonesians.

In recent months, select crack troops who have earned a reputation as cruel and destructive forces wherever they operate, have moved into the territory of West Papua to pursue similar objectives. They work in concert with another fairly recently arrived group, 8,000 Laskar Jihad who have been sent into the areas to stir ideological fires through a religious fundamentalism, not far different from what we have seen in operation in Kuta, Bali, recently. It is also thought that this group intends to carry out operations similar to those performed by the military-sponsored militias in East Timor.

Many other submissions will, no doubt, provide good and cogent suggestions to help us consider our position in the area, our important relationships with the people of Indonesia, and to evaluate the position of the West Papuan people within the political, social and economical content of the area of which Australia is so much a part.

May I make two suggestions to add to the list.

1. That Australia provide ample and generous opportunities for young West Papuans to come to Australia for education and training at all and different levels. Such trained people will provide skills and capacities at all levels of service and management in their own country. Already there are groups of people pursuing such goals here in Victoria and elsewhere with the aid of public and private communal bodies. Opportunities and facilities ought to be opened up to expand this effort.
2. We Australians, need to consider as vital issues the conditions, problems and developments of our nearest neighbours. We should not seek to find a solution that is only to the advantage of Australia, and its relationship with third parties. Each of our neighbours has its own call to make in regard to West Papua. But West Papua has a call to make upon all of us.

Australia and Indonesia might find it possible to commence a structural procedure through which they could discuss problems, misunderstandings, claims and the well being of people such as the West Papuans. The argument that West Papua's problems are purely internal matters for the Republic of Indonesia is no more than a political opportunism. One needs to look no further than East Timor to see the falsity of such an argument, and also to see the price that the third party had to pay while we defended the argument. Such a structure or forum could be eventually extended from time to time to include other neighbouring parties.

I would like to make one further point. It is one that is missing in many of the appraisals that are made of West Papua, its problems and its present condition.

In West Papua, the various Churches presently working among its people hold a position and determinative influence that is readily acceptable to the West Papuan people, and that is also understood and accepted as such by Indonesian authorities. For some reason, the position and influence that the Churches have among the West Papuans, even where the leadership is indigenous, seems to be peripheral and of no significance and substance in most analyses made by Australian interpreters. A constant plea made by West Papuans is that all people who seek to support them in their difficulties and speak out on their account take firm notice of the reliance that they have in their Churches and the various services provided by them.

I wish the Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee every success in the work at hand.



Bishop Hilton Deakin
West Papua Foundation Vic.