

Between the mine and the gun

'It's hard to express what has happened to the Amungme people. I have only the name 'Amungme' left. The mountains, the rivers, the forests all belong to Freeport and the government now. I have nothing.'

Amungme elder

'To the Amungme the land is the source of life'

Amungme leader

The Amungme are a highland people living in the south-central region of West Papua (which is called Irian Jaya by the Indonesians). In the last 30 years they have seen their sacred mountains destroyed by the American and British owned Grasberg mine, and watched as their relatives are killed by the Indonesian army who are 'defending' the mine.

Although the term 'Amungme' is now commonly used by the Amungme to describe both men and women, it is really the term for Amung men; Amung women are called Amung-in. The term Amung means 'the first' or 'the real' people. The 13,000 Amungme, like the other approximately 250 tribal peoples in West Papua, are completely different from the Indonesian people that run their country. They are Melanesians, as opposed to the Indonesian Malays; they speak different languages; have different religions; and come from different continents.

The Amungme live in the highlands around the giant Grasberg mine. The climate there is cold and humid. They live by a mixture of shifting cultivation, gathering roots, berries and nuts, hunting and pig husbandry. Men and women live in separate houses – the men in *Hitongi* (men's houses) and the women with their children. The houses are circular and made from materials found in the forests such as bark and palm leaves. The central feature of the houses are the hearths around which people eat and sleep.

There are four basic principles of Amungme life; generosity, reciprocity, individual freedom and relationships with the spirit world. These provide a natural framework for all aspects of Amungme life, including social relationships, religion and land ownership. When strangers come to their villages they are well looked after: reciprocity is key, and failure to reciprocate will be punished, either by the earth spirits or by God. One of the reasons the Amungme are so angered by the mining companies' treatment of them is the lack of reciprocity displayed towards them. They have given their land, copper and gold and have received almost nothing in return.

Amungme women spend most of the day in their vegetables gardens with their young children. Babies are carried in net bags slung over their shoulders, as are young piglets. Gardens are left fallow for a number





of years before they are used again. The Amungme have enough fallow land that they do not need to cut down more forest for cultivation, allowing them to use the forest for gathering and hunting. They have many taboos about what can and cannot be destroyed (prohibitions against cutting down certain trees and killing certain animals) which effectively conserve their forest. However, when Freeport came onto their land, many of their taboos were broken and now much of their sacred land has been destroyed.

The mountain peaks around them and the glaciers, are the most sacred sites for the Amungme. They believe the spirits of their ancestors dwell there, watching over the land for them. *'The high places are very special to us. When our ancestors die their souls travel to the mountains and the rivers in the high places.'*

The Amungme have a sophisticated system of land ownership, which is regulated through clans and families. Clans own specific areas, and within these specific plots are owned by individual men and women who clear the land and tend the gardens.

It is against Amungme law to sell land, moreover if, for example, land is taken over for a village school (or a mine), the owners believe they have rights to the profits of the land, be they sweet potatoes or copper and gold.

Grasberg

The Grasberg mine is the largest copper and gold mine in the world, making more than one million dollars profit per day.

The American company Freeport McMoRan owns over 80% of the mine. The British company Rio Tinto (formerly RTZ) is the second largest owner with 12%. President Suharto of Indonesia and his eldest son also have a financial interest in Grasberg.

Freeport has been in the area since 1967. Many Amungme who had been living in the area of the mine have had to be relocated to lowland villages, where they suffer from diseases such as malaria to which they have no resistance. They are also facing pressures from the many outsiders who have moved into the area for jobs. Their lowland neighbours,

the Kamoro, have also been relocated as a result of the 125,000 tons of mining waste that are pumped into their rivers everyday. This has flooded their rivers and killed, not only the fish, but also the sago trees which are their main food source. Freeport's plan to expand the mine with the help of US \$750 million from the British company, Rio Tinto, spells more disaster for the Amungme and Kamoro.

The mine is seen as a 'vital project' by the government of Indonesia, which provides approximately 6,000 soldiers to protect it. As a consequence, the area around the mine is now the most militarised area in Indonesia. This heavy army presence has led to many human rights violations. Local people have said that Freeport's security personnel have also been involved in the killings, torture and disappearances that occur around the mine. For example, in August and September of 1997, nine tribal people are known to have died in suspicious circumstances. Freeport personnel were accused of playing a role in three of those deaths.

However, the Amungme are fighting back. They have set up LEMASA, the Amungme Tribal Council, which consists of the heads of all the Amungme clans. They have come together and are demanding that their rights be respected, and that they receive adequate compensation for the loss of their land and the destruction of their holy mountains. The LEMASA chairman has taken Freeport to court in the United States, suing them for US\$6 billion.

More than anything else, the Amungme want to be recognised as a people. They want others to know that they exist and for their rights to their own beliefs and lands to be respected. When the mining company offered them 1% of the profits from the mine they rejected this as a bribe, saying it failed to address the true causes of their discontent. An Amungme leader has said, *'Problems that the Amungme people have been dealing with for more than 28 years cannot be solved solely with money. The hurt incurred by the people will never heal unless our rights as Amungme are recognised.'*

Background Reading

- Tapol, *West Papua: The Obliteration of a People*, London, 1983.
- Anti-Slavery International, *Plunder in Paradise*, London, 1990.
- Monbiot, G., *Poisoned Arrows* Abacus Books, London, 1989. (Out of print, available from Survival.)
- Start, D., *The Open Cage*, Harper Collins, London, 1997.

Between the mine and the gun © Survival 1998.
For copies of other background sheets or more information about Survival's work contact:
Survival, 6 Charterhouse Buildings,
London, EC1M 7ET, United Kingdom.
Tel: 020 7687 8700, Fax: 020 7687 8701.

Survival is a worldwide organisation supporting tribal peoples. It stands for their right to decide their own future and helps them protect their lives, lands and human rights.

