

# A multitude of peoples

*'My hairs has been pulled out, but they are not satisfied yet. Then they began taking my flesh, and even started pulling out my heart. Soon I will be crushed and shattered inside.'*

Papuan man 1990

## The people and the island

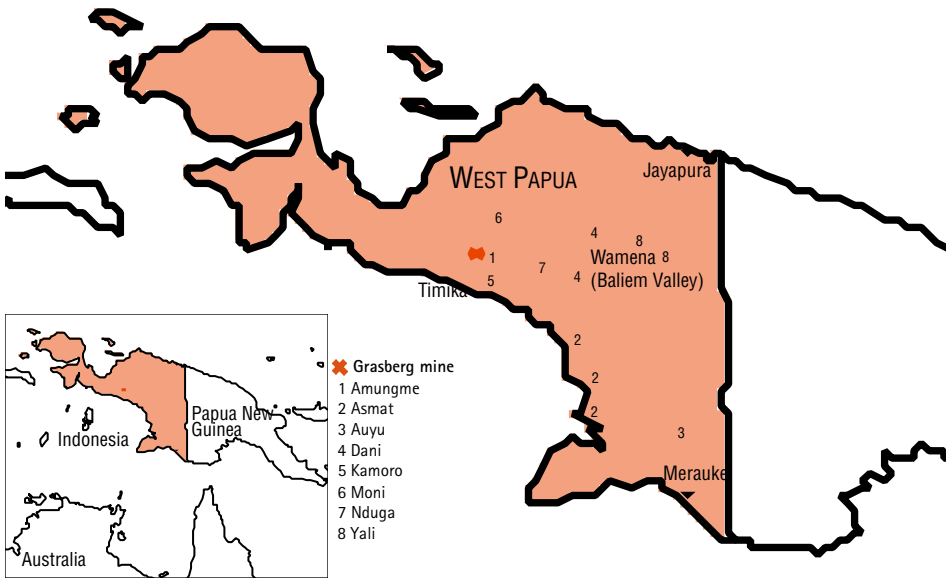
There are approximately one million Papuans belonging to 250 tribes in West Papua. West Papua is the western half of the island of New Guinea, and is called Irian Jaya by the Indonesians; the eastern half is the independent country of Papua New Guinea. The West Papuans are ethnically and culturally distinct from the Indonesians who rule them from Jakarta, 3,000 miles to the west. New Guinea has an astonishing cultural and linguistic diversity: it contains only 0.01% of the world's population, but contains 15% of the world's known languages.

New Guinea is the second largest island in the world. West Papua and its peoples are divided into two distinct zones: the highlands and the lowlands. The central mountainous range is home to the highland tribes, sometimes known as the *kotekas* after the penis gourds worn by the men. They practice pig husbandry and sweet potato cultivation. These tribes include the Amungme on whose land Freeport's giant Grasberg mine is built, and the Dani of the Baliem valley. The lowland people, such as the Asmat and Kamoro, live in the swampy and malarial coastal areas which contain abundant sago palms and game.

## The history

West Papua was colonised by the Dutch in 1714, although they had very little presence there. As it has no connection either geographically or ethnically with the rest of Indonesia, when the Dutch handed over their East Indies colony to Indonesia for independence in 1950 they hung on to West Papua, which they intended to prepare for its own independence. The Papuans began to choose a name (West Papua), a flag and a system of leadership. However the Indonesians were insistent that the Dutch must hand over their former colony in its entirety. In 1962, under pressure from the US who feared that Indonesia would move further towards communism, the Dutch agreed to a UN-brokered deal in which the UN would administer West New Guinea in preparation for a plebiscite, called 'The Act of Free Choice'. In this referendum, the Papuans were supposed to choose between independence or becoming part of Indonesia. The UN handed the territory over to the Indonesians in 1963, who renamed it Irian Barat, meaning West Irian. (In 1973 they changed the name again, to Irian Jaya, literally 'Victorious Hot Place'). In 1969 'The Act of Free Choice' finally took place. It is commonly known as 'The Act Free of Choice' in West Papua, as only 1,025 handpicked Papuans were allowed to vote, some literally with guns at their heads. Unsurprisingly, they voted unanimously to become part of Indonesia.





Popular discontent at the Indonesian takeover of their land resulted in the formation of the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM - the Free Papua Movement), an armed independence movement which is still active. It made international headlines in 1996 by taking hostage a group of European and Indonesian scientists and holding them for four months: two Indonesians were killed when the hostages were freed by the Indonesian army.

### Threats

The most serious threat facing all the tribes of West Papua is repression by the Indonesian army, which has a long history of human rights violations against the Papuans. In 1977 the Indonesians launched an anti-guerrilla operation against the peoples of the central highlands which they called 'operation annihilation'. This consisted of aerial bombings of some villages and the military occupation of others, in which people were shot at random. Tribal leaders thought to be sympathetic to the OPM were dropped out of helicopters over the Baliem Valley as an example to others. It is impossible to estimate how many people were killed during this operation - estimates range from tens to hundreds of thousands. Almost every family in the highlands lost someone, many lost

everyone, the rivers were full of bodies and anyone who survived this time has a deep and bitter resentment towards the perpetrators.

The military operates slightly more subtly today, and the worst excesses of the late 1970's have not been repeated. However Bishop Munninghof, the Catholic Bishop for the diocese of Jayapura (West Papua's capital), reported deaths, torture and disappearances at the hands of the military around the area of the Grasberg mine in 1995. These included the shooting of 11 villagers, including women and children, in May of that year as they were gathered for prayer. Since then there have been numerous reports of human rights violations taking place in the area where the hostages were held by the OPM; the hostages heard bombing and machine gun fire whilst hiding in the forest and later said they were more frightened of the military than they were of their captors.

Exploitation of their natural resources is another major problem for the peoples of West Papua. The notorious Grasberg mine in the South Central highlands region, whose principal owners are the American company Freeport McMoRan and the British company Rio Tinto (formerly RTZ), is the

largest copper and gold mine in the world. It has had a devastating impact on both the highland Amungme, whose land it occupies, and the lowland Kamoro, who suffer the effects of the mine's wastes. Neither the Amungme nor the Kamoro have received adequate compensation for the loss of their lands and their sacred mountains, nor have their rights been recognised by the company. The companies are currently exploring along almost the entire central mountain range, and many tribes fear that they too will lose their land and way of life. Proposed logging, oil-palm plantations, a trans-Irian road and hydroelectric power stations are also serious threats facing the peoples of West Papua.

### Transmigration

The Indonesian government's transmigration programme aims to move millions of people from the densely populated central islands of Indonesia to the outer islands such as West Papua. The programme assumes that there are large tracts of unused land on these islands; however in reality these are the homes of tribal peoples who depend on their lands for their survival. The programme also has a more sinister agenda; to 'Indonesianise' the tribal peoples. Government officials have spoken of breeding the Papuans out of existence. The Governor of West Papua has said, '[Intermarriage] will give birth to a new generation of people without curly hair, sowing the seeds for greater beauty.'

Although the official transmigration programme has slowed in recent years, spontaneous migration is a grave and continuing problem for the tribal peoples of West Papua, as hundreds of settlers still arrive each week by boat, causing the Papuans to be ever more marginalised in their own land.

Despite the many problems faced by the peoples of West Papua there *is* hope. Some of the worst 'development' projects have been stopped through a combination of local opposition and international campaigning. For example, Survival supported the Auyu people against the building of a Scott Paper pulp project which would have been devastating

to their environment and way of life. Scott Paper abandoned the project. After many years of campaigning from Survival and other organisations, the World Bank stopped funding the transmigration programme which has led to a slowdown in the process and far fewer transmigrants arriving in West Papua. The Amungme and Kamoro affected by the Grasberg mine are fighting back: the Amungme have set up a tribal council, LEMASA, and are demanding their right to be recognised as a people. Amungme representatives are suing Freeport in the US courts for US \$6 billion in damages.

Survival is supporting the right of the peoples of West Papua to live on their own lands in peace.

### Background Reading

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