

'The Neglected Genocide': Abuses in Papua from 1977-1978

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Between 1977-1978, the Indonesian military conducted operations in the central highlands of Papua, during which many human rights violations took place. A report detailing these violations has been published by the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) and Human Rights and Peace for Papua (ICP), intimating that they in fact amount to genocide.

Produced after three years of research by the AHRC, the report reveals the death of over 4,000 indigenous Papuans, including minors, as a result of operations conducted by the Indonesian military in the area. Amongst those killed were infants and children, 10 years-old and younger, as well as elderly persons aged over 60. The methods of killing commonly used by the military at that time include aerial bombings and strafing by American-supplied OV-10 Bronco planes.

In addition to revealing the details of the murdered victims, the report narrates the stories of survivors who witnessed the brutality and inhuman treatment perpetrated by the Indonesian military at that time. An interviewed survivor, Reverend Matius Wenda (alias) shared his experience in witnessing the Indonesian military officers forcing elderly Papuans to consume their excrement. Another victim narrated how arrested Papuans were forced to stand in line in a field before being shot indiscriminately by the Indonesian military. The victim himself managed to survive by pretending to be dead.

Sexual violence against Papuan women is also reported to have been common during the military operation of the time, as described by one of the interviewed female survivors: "Breasts of some women were cut and they died. We were raped, abused and killed... Some women were only raped but others were raped and murdered."

The horrendous human rights violations are attributed to high ranking officials of the Indonesian military at that time, including the former Indonesian President, General Soeharto. Moreover, they amount to genocide as defined by the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. According to the AHRC, the abuses were directed at the Papuans with the intention to destroy them in part-under international jurisprudence, such acts are considered genocide. The choice of methods of attack-mass shootings, strafing, village bombings-which would inevitably cause detrimental casualties to the Papuans, underlines this intention to destroy.

The claim of genocide however, is questioned by Jakarta-based human rights groups and activists. Haris Azhar of the Commission of the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS), for instance, stated that 'there has never been genocide, there have been crimes against humanity'. He reasoned that abuses must constitute government policy to qualify as genocide.

The Indonesian government has not properly responded to the claims raised by the report. Presidential spokesman Teuku Faizasyah expressed that the term genocide is 'very tendentious', although admitting that he himself has not read the report. A local military officer in Papua, Lismar Lumban Siantar, called the report a 'hoax' and persuaded the public not to be influenced by 'outsiders' opinion'.

International human rights lawyer Jennifer Robinson meanwhile, expressed her appreciation for the report, calling it 'invaluable'. Positive responses were also expressed by Papuan groups, including the La Pago office of the Papuan Cultural Council. A member of the Council, Lemokh Mabel, asserted that there are many other victims yet to be identified in the AHRC's report. A prominent human rights lawyer in

Papua, Gustaf Kaver, told the media that the report gives some hope to the victims and should be used as a reference for the National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) to conduct an investigation.

In 2010, Komnas HAM concluded a report on gross human rights violations that took place in Papua during the military operation period which covers the abuses in the Central Highlands in 1977–1978. The report, however, is marked confidential and thus inaccessible to the public.

In fact, one of the central aims of the AHRC's report was to raise awareness on the history of violence in Papua. Not only is there a lack of discussion within Indonesian society regarding Papua's dark history and the role played by the Indonesian government and military, but even resources examining the abuses in the Central Highlands during 1977–1978 are very limited. According to the AHRC's Director for Policy and Programme Development, Basil Fernando, "The long period of authoritarianism under Soeharto has profoundly silenced the Indonesians from discussing its dark history related to Papua."

"Without any recognition from the government and the public at large in Indonesia on the state-sponsored wrongdoings in Papua, the ongoing conflicts in the area will only continue," Fernando added. "There should be genuine efforts from the government to provide justice for the Papuans, for instance by fulfilling their right to the truth."

One of the recommendations proposed by the report is the establishment of a local truth and reconciliation commission in Papua as provided for by the Special Autonomy Law enacted in 2001. It also calls for the government to comply with its international human rights obligations by lifting unreasonable and disproportionate restrictions on freedom of expression in the country to encourage an open discourse on the history of violence in Papua and by ensuring the safety of any individual speaking up on the issue.