

Vanstone refuses to return Papuans



All aboard ... Papuan asylum seekers enter a C130 Hercules at Weipa airport after undergoing health checks and processing yesterday. Photo: Kate Geraghty

By Tom Allard
January 20, 2006

INDONESIA'S hopes for 43 Papuan asylum seekers to be swiftly returned have been scuttled by the Minister for Immigration, Amanda Vanstone, after she said no consideration would be given to foreign relations in the assessment of their claims.

The asylum seekers - pro-independence activists and their families from the unsettled Indonesian province of Papua - were put on a Hercules aircraft last night and flown from Weipa on Cape York to a detention centre on Christmas Island.

Their arrival in Australia after a treacherous five-day journey in a traditional outrigger boat, complete with a banner decrying "genocide" by the Indonesian military, has already caused a fissure in relations between the two countries.

Indonesian officials went to Weipa yesterday and were allowed brief contact with the asylum seekers. Jakarta has said asylum claims of the Papuans are "baseless", entreaties dismissed by Senator Vanstone.

"Australia has always made decisions in relation to protection claims on the basis of the merit of the claim," she told ABC radio. "That has to be the case, rather than taking into account whether we'll upset one or other of Australia's friends and allies."

The incident comes as Jakarta and Canberra are negotiating a security treaty that is set to include a pledge by Australia not to interfere in provinces such as Papua.

The asylum seekers spent their first night in Australia at the Weipa convention centre. They underwent health checks and processing in Weipa, where police kept media at bay, cloaking the asylum seekers whenever they left the centre for a toilet break.

The asylum seekers are said to be in good health, although one woman was treated for minor injuries sustained on the journey.

Jeff Hryniuk, operations manager at Mapoon Council, who helped transport the asylum seekers shortly after they were discovered on Wednesday, said they had been in good spirits.

"They were friendly people, they wanted to shake hands, had big smiles," he told the Herald.

Senator Vanstone said the single men on the boat would be sent to an immigration detention centre, but families would not be split up and would be housed in facilities in the community.

The Greens senator Kerry Nettle urged the Government to let all the asylum seekers into the community once they had been subjected to security checks.

"It is the same Papuans who assisted Australian diggers during World War II - we have a debt to our near neighbours in Papua like we have the same debt to those in East Timor," she said.

John Dowd of the International Commission of Jurists said that, unlike many other boat people, the Papuans had travelled directly from their homeland to Australia. "Under Australian law they're obliged to treat them as lawful refugees," he said.

Copyright © 2006. The Sydney Morning Herald; Fairfax Media, www.smh.com.au

Charismatic leader being groomed for greatness

By Tom Allard
January 20, 2006



Outspoken ... Herman Waingai.

IN HERMAN Wainggai, the struggling West Papuan independence movement may have the articulate young leader it needs to get its message across to the mainstream.

Under constant siege by the Indonesian military and riven by factionalism in recent years, Papuan separatists have failed to make inroads into global consciousness as East Timor's independence movement did in the 1980s and 1990s.

While East Timor had Jose Ramos Horta and Bishop Carlos Belo, both Nobel Peace Prize winners, the Papuan cause has suffered without similar spokesmen or women who were credible at home and persuasive abroad.

Those who have met Wainggai have been universally impressed. "He's very committed and charismatic and has really good command of English. He's also really outspoken and forthright in his views," says Jason Macleod, a PhD student and activist who has interviewed Wainggai twice. "He's also a strategic thinker. He's really systematic in the way he demolished the Indonesian case on West Papua."

Wainggai has been at the vanguard of the student campaign for Papuan nationhood for the best part of a decade. In 2002, he was arrested and served two years in prison for his role in a ceremony where the Papuan flag, the Morning Star, was raised at Cenderawasih University in Abepura.

His uncle, Thomas Wainggai, died in prison after being arrested for his pro-independence views and his role in raising the Morning Star.

On his release in 2004, Wainggai resumed his protest activities and was clearly earmarked for greater things. He has studied at the University of Sydney's Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies and chosen to do a diplomacy course run by the Pacific Concerns Resource Centre in Fiji.

"He should adjust well to his new situation in Australia," the Fijian centre's associate director, Rex Rumakiek, says.

For Papua's independence push, much hinges on the application by Wainggai and his comrades for refugee status. It is no surprise that Indonesia has been so quick to vigorously oppose their asylum claims.

Copyright © 2006. The Sydney Morning Herald; Fairfax Media, www.smh.com.au

FORTY PAPUANS MISSING

by Tom Allard
January 18 2006

MORE than 40 asylum seekers, including four children, have reportedly gone missing after they fled the Indonesian province of Papua for Australia last week in a 25-metre boat.

Australian authorities are scouring the Torres Straits for the vessel, which was heading for Cape York peninsula, amid fears for the safety of those on board.

A spokeswoman for the Immigration Department said last night that the missing reports were being taken seriously.

"Coastwatch surveillance flights in the Torres Straits region have been adjusted to take account of the reports [of the missing boat]," she said.

Australian activists say nothing has been heard of the boat since it left Merauke as late as Friday morning. Among the 39 adults reportedly on board are some of Papua's leading independence activists.

If their boat succeeds in reaching the Australian mainland it will be only the third vessel carrying asylum seekers to do so since December 2001.

The convener of the Australian West Papuan Association, Louise Byrne, said the group was forced to flee amid repression by Indonesian authorities of independence advocates.

"We got the phone call from Merauke at 3am on Friday ... saying they had left," she said. "These are undoubtedly political activists. Their concern seems to be to preserve their activism. The Indonesian authorities have been extraordinarily effective in getting rid of people advocating independence for many years."

Resource-rich Papua has a Melanesian indigenous population and was only incorporated into Indonesia after a hotly disputed vote in 1969. In recent months Indonesia has shifted more than 10,000 troops to Papua, leading to a sharp escalation in tensions.

Unrest has worsened in the past week after 12 alleged Papuan separatists were arrested for an ambush in 2002 on a bus carrying people looking after the children of workers from the huge Freeport mine.

One Indonesian and two Americans were killed. Apprehending those responsible was a condition for the US resuming military ties with Indonesia, a step taken in November after 13 years.

Papuans have long accused the Indonesian military of orchestrating the attack.

A report by University of Sydney researchers last year, *Genocide in West Papua?*, accused the Indonesian military of murder, rape and the destruction of villages and livestock in Papua.

The report was rejected by the Indonesian Government.

Ms Byrne said family members of some of Papua's most famous activists were on board the boat, including the nephew of Thomas Waingai, Herman. Dr Waingai was a Papuan intellectual who died in a Jakarta prison after advocating independence.

Copyright © 2006. The Sydney Morning Herald; Fairfax Media, www.smh.com.au