

## The point of no return



A young boy at the Free West Papua protest outside the Indonesian embassy in Canberra.  
Photo: *Kylie Pickett*

6 April 2006  
Andra Jackson

**Indonesian assurances of safety for the West Papuans who fled there in January don't convince a refugee from the territory now living in Melbourne. History supports his view. By Andra Jackson.**

EXILED West Papuan independence leader Jacob Rumbiak is well placed to challenge the credibility of Indonesian assurances that 43 West Papuan refugees could have been safely returned to Indonesian-controlled West Papua.

The Indonesian Government and demonstrators in Jakarta have vented their fury at Australia for granting visas to 42 of the 43 West Papuan refugees, claiming it violates Indonesia's territorial integrity and upholds

the refugees' claims of genocide against West Papuans. What they conveniently disregard is Indonesia's track record with returned West Papuan refugees opposed to Indonesian rule.

In pressuring the Australian Government to hand them back, Indonesian Foreign Ministry spokesman Yuri Thamrin insisted the asylum seekers would be in no danger.

Rumbiak, who has lived in Melbourne since 1999, speaks from first-hand knowledge when he insists that Indonesian assurances cannot be trusted. As the co-ordinator of the non-violent struggle promoting West Papuans' political rights, university lecturer Rumbiak organised a 52,000-strong independence demonstration in Jayapura, West Papua's capital, on December 14, 1989.

As a result, he says, "I was targeted by the Indonesian military to be killed." He sought refuge in the Papua New Guinea consulate in Jayapura and requested political asylum from the PNG government. Sir Rabbie Namaliu was Prime Minister at the time and the PNG government offered to help Rumbiak cross its border, he says. He then sought a response from Indonesian authorities as his preference was to stay safely in Papua. On December 28, 1989, a deal was made at a meeting held at the PNG consulate in Jayapura and attended by Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alitas, Indonesia's military commander General LB Murdani and Indonesia's vicepresident, General Try Sutrisno.

"At this highest level," Rumbiak says, "we signed an agreement promising that they will guarantee my life, freedom and grant me a scholarship to study." Guarantees were also given for the safety of his wife and two children, aged three and one. Military attaches from Australia, PNG, Germany and Japan witnessed the signing.

Five minutes after the foreign officials had departed, Rumbiak and his wife were taken to a military camp. He was imprisoned for the next 10 years. After Soeharto's downfall, Rumbiak was transferred to house arrest in August 1998. He finally made his way to freedom after the United Nations accredited him to act as an observer during the East Timor referendum in 1999. He was later evacuated to Australia, where he was given a protection visa.

Had the 43 asylum seekers who fled Indonesia by boat in mid-January been returned, "they would have disappeared", Rumbiak says. He cites the exodus of around 25,000 refugees in 1984 across the border to refugee camps in PNG, saying more than 500 were sent back in 1987 by the PNG government at a time of good relations with Indonesia.

"Maybe they believed that Jakarta will protect Papuans, but in reality it did not." Some of those returned "disappeared", Rumbiak says.

Rumbiak claims about 200 people who returned from the border died after being poisoned. He says food such as sugar and rice supplied from government-controlled food stores was laced with formalin.

"They (Indonesian Intelligence) put poison in the food because they said when the refugees came back, we guarantee you a place, we guarantee you food." Many of the refugees were from Merauke and others were from Jayapura, as were some of the 43 West Papuans refugees who applied for protection visas in Australia in January.

Rumbiak recounts other cases. In 2000, large numbers of West Papuans returned from refugee camps across the border in PNG after a guarantee of their safety was given by former Indonesian President Dr

Abdurrahman Wahid — "a good man", he says. But a year later, after Megawati Soekarnoputri took over the presidency, "lots of Papuans raised the West Papuan Morning Star flag and were tortured and others disappeared, so those just back from PNG fled again to PNG."

The assurances of safety are only "camouflage words", he says.

Among refugees who have disappeared after crossing back into West Papua are members of Rumbiak's family. They and at the same time, give grounds for suspicion on the part of the Indonesian Administration that this was deliberate and ill-meant, thereby impairing neighbourly relations."

Neumann records a slight policy softening in the following years. While not formally granting any requests for political asylum, by 1973 Australia had given permissive residency in PNG to 550 refugees — on their undertaking not to engage in political activities against Indonesia. The refugees included Lazarus Itaar, a member of the freedom fighter group Organisasi Papua Merdeka (Free Papua Movement). He twice crossed the border in fear for his life and was only allowed to stay after his third flight.

Publicly, Australia maintained the fiction that returned refugees were not mistreated, with the minister reassuring Parliament in 1965 that there was no evidence suggesting this. Yet department files "contained references to refugees who had reportedly been beaten, imprisoned or murdered after their return", Neumann found.

In June 1968, Indonesian foreign minister Adam Malik claimed that, under the border agreement between Indonesia and Australia, Australia was bound to return every West Papuan who crossed into Australian territory. As unrest spread, people fled across the border, pursued by Indonesian troops who shot dead two refugees. There was no Australian protest.

A 5000-strong protest in Jayapura in May 1969 calling for a referendum on self determination was accompanied by the proclamation of a National Republic of West Papua. The crowd was dispersed with machine-gun fire and 12 protesters were imprisoned. The leader of the protesters, include relatives from the north coast such as Beny Brawar and Oelamas Rumbé, both in their late 30s, who had been in refugee camps in PNG.

"I heard they had returned but ... we couldn't find them," he says.

AUSTRALIA'S role in the "hidden" conflict that has been on its doorstep for the past 42 years has been a curious and inconsistent one. A bond was forged during the Second World War when the Japanese invaded Dutch controlled New Guinea (which included West Papua) and the Australian Territories, the present PNG. The highlands in both West Papua and New Guinea were key battlefields in the South-West Pacific theatre. According to the Wikipedia online encyclopedia: "Papuans often gave vital assistance to the Allies, fighting alongside Australian and US troops, and carrying equipment and injured men across New Guinea."

When Indonesia was granted independence in 1949, West Papua remained under Dutch control. Australian government records obtained by Greens Senator Bob Brown show that Australia initially supported a 1962 United Nation sanctioned agreement between Holland, West Papua's former colonial ruler, and Indonesia, which laid claim to western New Guinea.

Under the agreement, every adult would have a vote in a plebiscite, known as the Act of Free Choice, to decide whether they wanted to be ruled by Indonesia.

Yet Australia seemingly acquiesced when Indonesia subsequently unilaterally changed those terms to a vote by 1026 local elders selected by Indonesian authorities, and dispensed with UN interim rule.

In the lead-up to the 1969 plebiscite, there were protests and arrests, with increasing numbers of West Papuans fleeing across the border into PNG, then still under Australian jurisdiction. In his book *Refuge Australia: Australia's Humanitarian Record*, Klaus Neumann chronicles how Australia in the 1960s only accepted West Papuan refugees sponsored by the departing Dutch authorities and sent back all others. Those returned included a teacher, Fred Mandowen, who in requesting asylum said "(those) who say they are Papuans and won't acknowledge that they are Indonesians are jailed and shot. If someone keeps the Papuan flag, he is shot."

The Department of Territories drafted a policy statement in 1964 on Australia's thinking on West Papuan refugees that has uncanny echoes in the concerns about the granting of protection visas to the West Papuan refugees on March 23. Approved by then minister Charles Barnes of the Menzies government, it said: "To allow permanent movement across the border for dissidents to settle in the Australian territory could start migration of such numbers as might burden the people receiving them and create administrative and other problems in our own Territory, Clemens Runaweri, and two others escaped across the border into PNG.

"They were getting ready to get on a plane to go to the United Nations to protest as to what was going to happen and an Australian official was sent by the Government to arrest them, and pull them off that plane," says Melbourne Anglican priest Reverend Peter Woods, who served as a missionary in West Papua from 1978 to 1983.

"They had tickets to go and they were put on Manus Island so that they could not interfere in the (plebiscite)." This Australian intervention is documented in Mark Worth's 2004 film, *Land of the Morning Star*.

Worth grew up on the then Australian naval base at Manus Island off the east coast of PNG, where his father was an officer. He witnessed the arrival of refugees. Manus Island at that stage held 56 detainees, and was one of three holding camps in PNG where Australia sent West Papuan refugees. Australia still contributes to the funding of the Manus Island detention centre.

Among West Papuan grievances are human rights abuses, the confiscation of land, including farming land, the imposition of forced migration from Java and Sulawesi, and the deal signed in 1969 that gave control of the lucrative Freeport copper and gold mine to American interests, with the bulk of its tax siphoned off to Jakarta.

Church groups estimate that 100,000 people have died under Indonesian rule. Amnesty International Australia says the human rights situation in West Papua remains a concern. According to Amnesty, "reports include extrajudicial executions, disappearances, torture and ill-treatment and arbitrary detentions in Papua Province, where there is an ongoing struggle for independence from Indonesia."

Rumbiak estimates that there are 25,000 West Papuans refugees in PNG and more than 20,000 in the Netherlands.

Until this year, information about West Papua mainly seeped out through a handful of Australian priests working there, and human rights groups.

But the flight of the 43 asylum-seeking student activists in a seven-metre home-made canoe with outboard rigger drew international headlines and allowed people from West Papua to tell the world their story. Some had been jailed and claim they know of others who have been poisoned. A number witnessed brutalities during pro-independence ceremonies that turned into demonstrations.

The group's legal representative, David Manne, Co-ordinator of the Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre, says it was deeply concerning that family members of the 43 refugees were being intimidated by direct visits from members of Indonesia's security forces. As Indonesia dispatched warships off the West Papua coast to intercept asylum seekers this week, Manne rebuffed suggestions that granting the protection visas would trigger further flights. That would depend on complex factors such as "human rights developments in the country and the capacity of people to leave".

Scott Burchill, senior lecturer at Deakin University's School of International and Political Studies, says the decision to grant 42 of the 43 visas might fly in the face of Australia's past stance on West Papuan refugees but was taken "because Immigration have to mind their image They had no option in the end because the people selected for that voyage were clearly in the category of political activists who experienced intimidation".

Burchill says their arrival on an Australian beach was a huge international breakthrough for the West Papuans. No doubt, he says, Indonesia has operatives here to keep an eye on West Papuans and their supporters. But the international impact of the refugees' flight to safety was one that Indonesian authorities were powerless to stop because they are "very poor at public relations".

The Indonesians' track record on West Papua also does not help their cause. Rumbiak, now a volunteer researcher for RMIT's Global Institute, says he does not trust Jakarta's undertakings on anything. In 1949, he says, on assuming independence, the Indonesian government said "they wanted to build Papua. And again in 1963 when West Papua was transferred by the United Nations. The promise was repeated in 1969, 1974 and 1982. But nothing ..."