

Visa ruling puts Jakarta ties at risk

By Tom Allard and Craig Skehan
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AUSTRALIA has recognised there are serious human rights abuses in the Indonesian province of Papua by granting visas to 42 asylum seekers on the basis of a "well-founded fear of persecution".

Despite considerable diplomatic massaging from Canberra yesterday, the decision has already antagonised Indonesia and has been condemned by an influential MP in Jakarta as an "unfriendly" act.

The Indonesian Government went to great lengths to try to get the Papuans home. The President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, even called the Prime Minister, John Howard, offering his personal guarantee no harm would come to them.

However, the Immigration Department rejected the pleas, even after warnings from senior Australian foreign affairs officials.

Mr Howard last night refused to say whether he endorsed the decision and there was no official comment from Jakarta, although diplomatic sources said the decision was "disappointing".

Djoko Susilo, a nationalist MP and member of Indonesia's powerful foreign affairs commission, called on the Indonesian Government to formally protest, saying Australia clearly believed the claims of the asylum seekers. "This is an unfriendly gesture by the Australian Government," he said.

The issue could weaken Indonesian support for a new security pact the two countries are negotiating and refocus Australian concerns about abuses by Indonesian military and police.

The asylum seekers arrived in January. Independence activists said they were fleeing "genocide" and oppression by the Indonesian military and police.

The Immigration Department offered all but one of the Papuans seeking asylum a temporary protection visa, which lasts for three years and is easily renewable. The remaining claim is still being processed.

In a statement read out last night, the leader of the Papuans, Herman Wainggai, thanked the Australian Government and people for a "fair and just decision". He said: "We were threatened in an extremely dangerous position.

"We trust that the Indonesians will act with maturity and see that the situation in West Papua is very serious and one that must be dealt with peacefully."

Papua's indigenous population has been campaigning for independence since the United Nations handed the resource-rich province to Indonesia in 1969.

Senior Australian officials confirmed yesterday that the Papuans had been granted visas based on a determination that they had established a "well-founded fear of persecution".

Indonesia has insisted that there are no abuses in Papua and is acutely sensitive to any notion of Papuan independence, especially after Australia's lead role in liberating its former province of East Timor.

It is also understood that in past weeks senior Australian Foreign Affairs officials expressed concern to the Immigration Department about the potential impact the Papuans would have on Australia's relationship with Indonesia.

However, the Immigration Minister, Amanda Vanstone, said Australia was impartially meeting its domestic and international obligations.

"Any further decisions will continue to be made on that basis - that is in accordance with Australian and international law."

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