

## **SBS Dateline: West Papua - Long Boat to Freedom**

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**With George Negus**

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Back in mid-January, when 43 asylum seekers came ashore in far north Queensland, pretty quickly, the Howard Government found itself in a political bind. Indonesian President Yudhoyono was straight on the phone to John Howard promising in effect, "Send them back. They won't be harmed when they get here." But at the same time, the West Papuans were telling Immigration officials they feared the worst if they returned.

Last week, when they were granted temporary visas, there were howls of outrage from Jakarta and the Indonesian Ambassador to Canberra was hastily withdrawn in protest. The fracas is now being described as the worst rift in our relations with Indonesia since Australian troops were sent to East Timor six years ago.

Late last week, Dateline's Mark Davis managed to get himself to Christmas Island, where he met with the refugees to find out just why they made their hair-raising voyage.

**REPORTER: Mark Davis.**

All sorts of people have washed ashore on Christmas Island but none quite like this. These West Papuan men have just been released from detention. Today they are re-united with their families, housed in the suburbs above the town.

**HERMAN WANGAI, ACTIVIST** Good day for us West Papuan people. We heard from Australian Government yesterday that we have protection visa for three years.

It's hard to imagine 43 of these men, women and children crammed into an outrigger canoe for five weeks, lost at sea, without food or water, for the last four days. They survived an incredible journey through treacherous seas and now a political storm is breaking around them.

**HERMAN WANGAI:** I just want to say, just thank you.

**REPORTER:** Indonesia is very angry.

**HERMAN WANGAI:** Yeah, but for me and my friends, Indonesia angry just for one day but for West Papuan people, we suffering for 40 years.

Herman Wangai, a well known independence activist in West Papua, led the exodus which included his wife Ferra, also an activist, and their two children.

**HERMAN WANGAI:** If Australian Government send me back to West Papua, I will die. That is reality. I don't want to talk lies, because we have experienced under control of Indonesia military.

Indonesian intelligence were closing in around Wangai late last year for his activities. He'd already served 2.5 years in prison for raising the outlawed West Papuan flag, a serious and often deadly offence in Indonesian West Papua.

**HERMAN WANGAI:** 2004, I completed my prison...

**REPORTER:** And this was for a flag-raising, was it?

**HERMAN WANGAI:** Yes, raising a flag in West Papua.

Herman and friends were planning another flag-raising for December 1 last year.

**HERMAN WANGAI:** I have to escape.

Their involvement became known to the authorities. Fearing a wave of arrests, Herman and co. set out to sea. This group are a mixture of urban students and bush activists, all of them serial flag-raisers for the independence movement.

**HERMAN WANGAI:** All of us are activists from Jakarta, a lot are from West Papua, in Jayapura.

**REPORTER:** But why now, why this year?

**HERMAN WANGAI:** Yes in West Papua the situation now is very risky, a very bad situation because you know every way in West Papua, especially in Jayapura town the military take over every place, district and especially in university. They come to university to find out who are West Papuan activists.

Since the loss of East Timor, thousands more police and military have been deployed in West Papua. In the remote highlands, tribal protests and flag raisings have been met with deadly force. In the towns, the students, including many of the refugees, have risked their liberty, even their lives, through a string of protests in recent years.

**MAN (Translation)** We were intimidated and terrorised, slandered and beaten, so we the Papuan people and students in particular, organised protests demanding justice in West Papua from the Indonesian government. This was a good opportunity for the Indonesian government, military and police to kill us with guns.

All but one of the refugees are now free but not all are free of fear.

**YOUNG MAN** I saw with my eyes, plenty people die. Blood all over the place. I am just crying and pray that all of my friends run to the jungle...

This young man still fears reprisals against his family in West Papua but wants to tell of the things he has seen in recent years.

**YOUNG MAN** A lot of army come to our village and we can not run and we hear a gun. Plenty people die. Student, old ladies, child and I am just crying with my friends.

A witness to a massacre, an activist himself, he also faces another danger, unique to many in his group - he is the son of a well-known independence leader, making him a special target for Indonesian intelligence.

**YOUNG MAN** My father was arrested, in jail, by military in Indonesia and the effect of that is I am not free to get school and stuff like that.

The most remarkable story belongs to four children who came alone on the boat, without their parents.

**REPORTER** And what happens today? What is special about today?

**BOY (Translation)** We're sad to be leaving our teachers and our friends at this school.

Today is their last day at Christmas Island Public School, where they have been studying for the last two months.

**BOY (Translation)** We like it a lot, school here is really disciplined, disciplined and advanced.

An ordinary Australian morning for boys who have had anything but an ordinary childhood.

**REPORTER** The Indonesian army killed your grandfather? How did they kill him?

**BOY (Translation)** They shot him.

**REPORTER** Because he was activist?

**BOY 1 (Translation)** Yes.

Most of the children in this group, including some older teenage girls, who do not wish to appear, are from remote highland villages. Their fathers, living in the jungle, constantly hunted by the Indonesian army.

**BOY 2 (Translation)** My father is a freedom fighter, his life is never easy. He's always being chased, he's been arrested and terrorised. My father has a hard time, he sleeps in the jungle.

**BOY 1 (Translation)** My father was chased by Indonesian troops, by TNI troops, he was chased and terrorised. My grandfather was shot and thrown into the sea. No he was thrown into the river. Some people were shot dead with guns, some were hung by the neck.

Their fathers, fearing that their own lives may soon end, made the heart-rending decision to send their children into exile. For most of the boys, it was the first time they'd ever seen the sea.

**BOY (Translation)** When we were on the boat we cried and called out to our fathers "Dad, we really don't want to go on this journey" and we called out to God "God help us".

**BOY (Translation)** We're going to study and learn English so we can speak English, English is important to us because we live in Australia now.

Whatever traumas they have suffered in West Papua, and on their journey, these people have been treated well by officials here and welcomed by many residents. Christmas Island has been kind to them. It's lunchtime at the Chinese Literary Association and the West Papuans are guests of honour.

**GORDON THOMPSON, SHIRE PRESIDENT** The West Papuan group are all flying out today, and it is very important I think, that we have a meal together to say farewell.

Christmas Island Shire President, Gordon Thompson, has openly welcomed the Papuans.

**GORDON THOMPSON** 70% of the island is National Park, so it's forest.

He is proud of his island but fears that its future will not be tourism but as an Australian Government prison.

**GORDON THOMPSON** The reason we do not want Christmas Island to be a detention centre I guess, is because we do not believe that people who are fleeing repressive governments should be locked up at all.

**REPORTER** So, the official position of the Shire is you do not want them.

**GORDON THOMPSON** We do not have the decision-making power for we would like. We should have. Behold.

Gordon may hope that the Christmas Island is not seen as a prison but it is well on the way to becoming

that. This centre, due to be finished next year, is likely to replace the so called Pacific solution, a remote holding centre where certain Australian laws will not apply. The Papuans are now waiting for the weather to clear and for a charter flight to take them to Melbourne. A radically new life awaits all of them, but especially the boys from the bush.

**REPORTER** Have you seen a big city before, what's the biggest city you've seen before?

**BOY (Translation)** Only in a photo.

**REPORTER** In Melbourne, it is very big, it's like Jayapura times one thousand, 4 million people.

The Papuans are largely oblivious to the political debate that will surround them in Australia, on Christmas Island it is just a time for goodbye's and thank you's.

**HERMAN WANGAI** We come under pressure, military government of Indonesia. Without you praying, without you support. We will in short time get protection visa from Australian government. You are friendly people, you are kindest people. Also Gordon Thompson, thank you for your supper.