

REVIEW OF PAPUA IN SIGHT – BARRIERS AND BEYOND

Madelyn van Rijckevorsel (2023)

Madelyn van Rijckevorsel's interest in West Papua was piqued by her grandfather's exploration of the glacial 15000 footers on the largest tropical island in the world during Dutch colonial times. Her medical background, however, prompted her to focus on the plight of West Papuans under the oppressive rule of Indonesia.

As Madelyn puts it, 'The focus of my private initiative would be Indonesia's grassroots *pasyandu* program with its checkups, vaccinations and health education, and how it was being implemented in Papua.'

As a medical doctor specialising in health care, Madelyn travelled extensively in West Papua between 2010 and 2017 and discovered that the Indonesian Government had committed gross abuses of the human rights of the indigenous Melanesian people who have lived in West Papua for thousands of years.

Her short but powerful analysis of the cruel obstacles facing the local people ought to be read by each member country of the United Nations, as well as by politicians and the general public.

While some progress has been made in coastal regions and the feeding of starving villages in remote areas for instance, West Papuans are consistently discriminated against by Jakarta and relentlessly persecuted by the Indonesian military. Moreover, through transmigration (now about 50/50), the Indonesian Government is hoping to dilute local resistance with the aim of assimilating Papuans into the Indonesian way of life.

The brutality of the Indonesian military (Kopassus and TNI) has created fear, internal displacement, disruption and transformed West Papua into a chattel community and culture. Freedom of expression and cultural events are outlawed and activists are routinely arrested, tortured or killed. Journalists, the UN High Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet (her tenure now ended) and foreign politicians are routinely refused entry or cooperation. West Papua largely remains a closed society.

Madelyn's book lays bare the evils of an occupying country. The *repression and killing* being perpetrated in West Papua have been put in the too difficult basket by the international community's major players. But as Madelyn points out in Appendix A of her well-researched book,

"The UN General Assembly has not explicitly agreed with Indonesia's annexation/integration of West Papua. They have acknowledged the New York Agreement and the Act of Free Choice but have not endorsed them (UNGA Res 1752 and 2504). So, the UN General Assembly is not prevented from recognising the situation as one of continuous Non-Self Governing."

The legal status of West Papua, therefore, has not been resolved nor have all the other arguments in support of West Papuan independence been addressed properly by the international community.

The Indonesian Government won't surrender its gold/copper laying goose, PT Freeport which has contributed 29.3 billion U.S dollars to the Indonesian Government since 1992 plus its other investments in West Papua such as in palm oil. Mining, as well documented, is rapidly destroying the lives of West Papuans through deforestation and poisoning of rivers and habitat.

While royalties and taxes have benefited Jakarta and Indonesian immigrants to West Papua, the West Papuans have been neglected in health and education and are regarded as second-rate citizens in their own native land.

The Republic of Indonesia, a current member of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has denied human rights abuses and told other nation states to “mind their own business.” How ironic. What has it got to hide? The evidence of persecution is overwhelming and shameful.

Fortunately, however slowly, international pressure has been brought to bear on what is occurring in West Papua. But there is much more to do. Australia is not only a laggard in this regard but downright cowardly.

As Madelyn reminds us, ‘The Pacific Islands Forum, the Melanesian Spearhead Group (especially the Republic of Vanuatu), and the 79 countries of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) were vocal in 2019 and 2021, calling for UN fact-finding missions and requesting that West Papua become a standing item on the UNHRC agenda.’ Both the U.K and the Netherlands are also acutely aware of the injustices perpetrated by Indonesia in West Papua.

Madelyn van Rijckevorsel’s powerful book is meticulously researched and clearly written, humanely considered and current.

Like Madelyn we – West Papuans and the international community alike – are all waiting for Indonesia’s future moves under Prabowo Subianto.

It might now be a good time for the younger better educated generations of Indonesia to revisit the true meaning of *Pancasila* or the *Five Principles* espoused in the beginning of the Indonesian Republic. Lofty ideals indeed negated daily by Indonesian occupation.

Madelyn’s book is a brilliant and unbiased contribution to the understanding of West Papua today. Her aim is to highlight the shortcomings of Indonesian rule and the parlous state of the West Papuans. In this she has succeeded admirably.

Henri Licht, 4 January 2025

Henri Licht is a Dutch-Australian writer. He translated ‘We Fought in the Jungle: My guerilla struggle in Dutch New Guinea in the Second World War’ (Sergeant M. Ch. Kokkelink, Amsterdam, 1956) which the West Papua Women’s Office–Docklands published by in 2019.