

Ignoring the lesson of East Timor

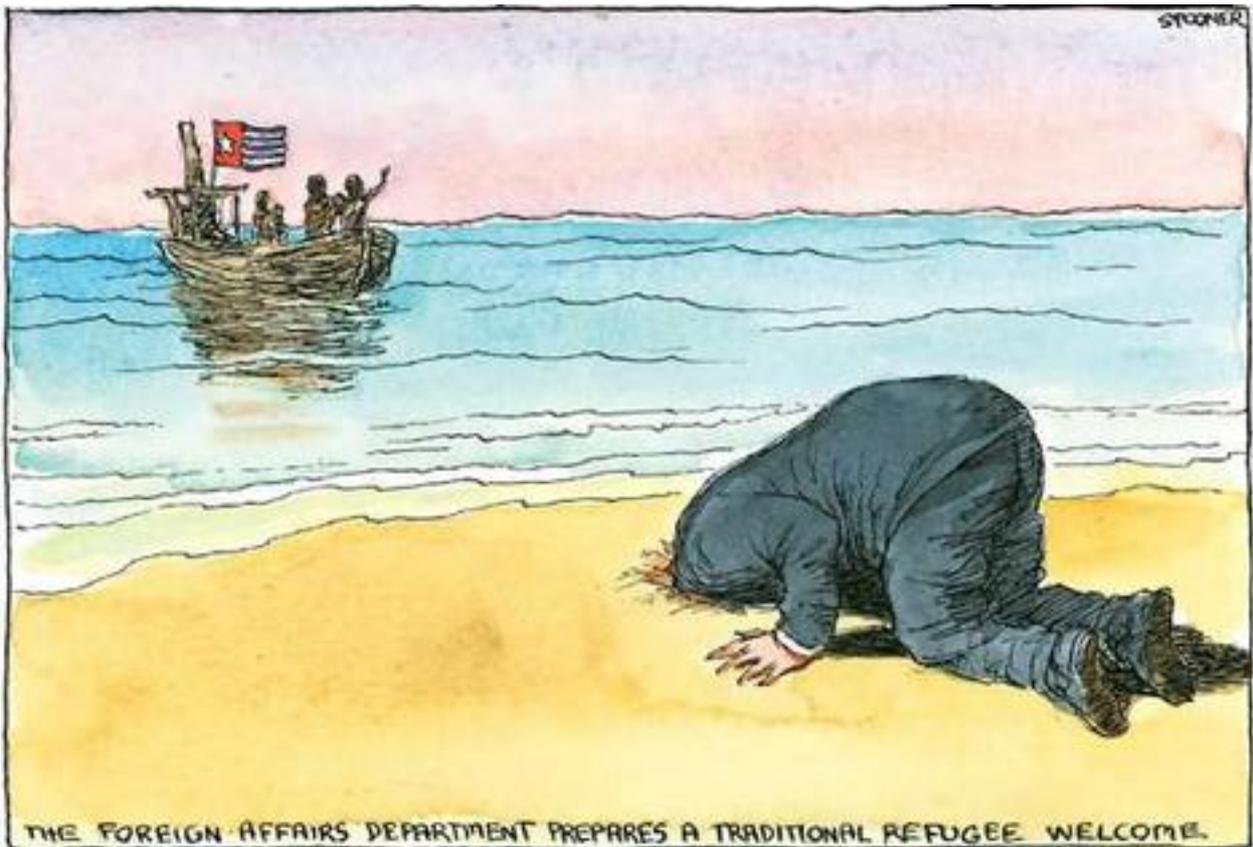


Illustration: John Spooner

By Mark Baker

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IN LATE 1969 one of the most shameful episodes in the history of decolonisation took place on Australia's northern doorstep. In a so-called "Act of Free Choice" — thereafter recalled as "The Act of No Choice" — the 1 million people of the then territory of West New Guinea were traded from one foreign master to another.

A thousand people — hand-picked by the Indonesian military and threatened with reprisals if they failed to comply — voted "unanimously" for the former Dutch colony to be formally incorporated into Indonesia.

Within weeks, this travesty of self-determination was rubber-stamped by the United Nations with the connivance of the United States and the acquiescence of Australia.

In the latest diplomatic dust-up between Canberra and Jakarta, over Papuan asylum seekers, much has been made of the supposed differences between the troubled modern history of the territory now known as West Papua and that of East Timor — particularly by an Australian Government that likes to congratulate itself on its role in helping secure Timorese independence but is now determined to deny legitimacy to the identical ambitions of indigenous Papuans.

The prize for the most ignorant contribution this week to an already muddied debate goes to Treasurer Peter Costello who told ABC radio: "West Papua has always been part of Indonesia. Ever since Indonesia has existed as an independent country West Papua had always been part of Indonesia whereas, East Timor, of course was not."

Actually, Peter, the Dutch did not leave West Papua until 1962 — 13 years after relinquishing the rest of their Asian empire to the new Indonesian republic — and then only after a long struggle, supported by the Menzies Government through the 1950s, to resist the expansionist ambitions of the leftist Soekarno regime in Jakarta. It was another seven years before Jakarta's land grab was formalised via the UN pantomime.

The disturbing truth is that West Papua and East Timor have so much in common that it would be unwise of either Jakarta or Canberra to think that the history of Timor cannot be repeated in West Papua — and foolhardy of both not to tailor their policy responses accordingly.

Both territories are demonstrably different from the Indonesian mainstream in culture, language and religion. Both were press-ganged into the Indonesian republic — Timor through a brazen and bloody invasion in 1975; West Papua via Western capitulation under threat of annexation.

In Timor, a tiny guerilla army kept alive the dream of independence until the fall of the Soeharto regime created the possibility. In West Papua, the ragtag OPM guerillas have fought even longer for the same independence that came automatically to their Melanesian brothers in neighbouring Papua New Guinea, and are now joined by a new generation of determined urban activists.

The critical difference between the two national stories is that while Jakarta was able to relinquish East Timor when its continued brutal occupation became untenable at little immediate cost beyond a massive loss of face, West Papua has become vital to Indonesia's development.

West Papua's vast mineral, timber and fisheries resources ought to have put its people among the richest in the developing world. Instead they remain locked in poverty; second-class citizens in a territory dominated by more than a million people brought from other parts of Indonesia under the transmigration program — the Soeharto regime's brand of ethnic cleansing.

The American-owned Freeport mine — the world's biggest gold mine and third largest copper deposit — has contributed an estimated \$33 billion to the Indonesian economy since the 1960s, only a fraction of that coming back to the local people. That inequity, combined with the massive environmental impact of mining, has fuelled the separatist unrest.

Freeport's response, according to a recent *New York Times* investigation, has been to pay tens of millions in "protection" money to Indonesian security forces whose methods include a well-documented history of torture, rape and extrajudicial killing.

The angry Indonesian reaction to the decision allowing 42 West Papua asylum seekers to remain temporarily in Australia, and the Howard Government's responses to that, suggest neither government acknowledges the magnitude of the problem unfolding in West Papua.

The Papuan issue is a critical test for the reformist President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Under challenge from nationalist rivals and entrenched military corruption, he is understandably upset at developments that make his task even harder and he must be seen at home to be taking a tough line with Australia. But if Indonesia's much-vaunted return to democracy means anything, then Yudhoyono must also acknowledge and act on the deteriorating situation in West Papua.

For its part, Canberra achieves nothing by refusing to face the fact of systematic human rights abuses, economic exploitation and environmental vandalism that is forming an explosive political cocktail in West Papua. Instead of speaking out in defence of principle — and urging Jakarta to stick to its promises of political autonomy and social justice for the Papuans — the Federal Government clings to the same tired script of denial and appeasement that unfolded so disastrously in East Timor.

The Government's stumbling responses to the boat people crisis — including a risky proposal for joint naval patrols to stop any more people reaching Australia — suggest it would prefer to bury its head in the sand rather than get serious about the underlying issues.

Asked earlier this week how he intended to respond to Indonesia's protests, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said: "Well, look, I think we'll just let things plod along for a little while and gradually rebuild our communications."

Mark Baker is diplomatic editor.