

Free at last, West Papuan refugees rejoice in new dawn



A group of West Papuan refugees brandish their forbidden flag as they celebrate after arriving in Melbourne from Christmas Island yesterday. Photo: Jason South

By Andra Jackson
The Age, 4 April 2006

FORTY-TWO West Papuan refugees recalled the start of their journey into exile yesterday when they stood on the tarmac at Tullamarine and sang a freedom song from Serui Island.

The island — off the north coast of West Papua — is the home of their leader, student activist Herman Waingai, who is tipped to be a future West Papuan leader.

It is also where the outrigger canoe for their five-day voyage was secretly built. The group — 32 adults and 10 children — landed near the Gulf of Carpentaria on January 18.

As the refugees, who have been granted protection visas, left the plane from Christmas Island yesterday, they carried a West Papuan flag.

Three of the refugees, one of them a woman juggling a young child on her hip, danced their way down the tarmac as they triumphantly held up their flag, the Morning Star.

In Indonesian-controlled West Papua, just flying the flag can bring a jail sentence.

In 2002, Mr Wainggai was imprisoned for two years over his role in a university ceremony where the West Papuan flag was raised. When the flag started to sag yesterday, Mr Wainggai hastened forward to have it respectfully raised higher.

Many of the refugees sported straw hats and colourful shirts, reflecting the climate of Christmas Island, where they waited two months for their asylum claims to be accepted.

Mr Wainggai said: "Today we are happy but in West Papua they are still suffering."

Later, talking at a press conference on human rights violations in West Papua, he broke down as he described: "I see my friends shot by the guns of Indonesia. In my eyes, I witness. How can I explain that to the international community?"

Mr Wainggai is the nephew of the West Papuan independence leader Thomas Wainggai, who died 10 years ago in a Jakarta prison while serving a life term for raising the West Papuan flag.

He said the West Papuan struggle for independence had been going on for 42 years but Papuans remained "under pressure from the Government of Indonesia".

"There is no freedom for talking about our rights," he said. Those taking part in peaceful protests were arrested and taken to Indonesian courts where "there is no justice".

The granting of protection visas to the group, he said, was "a golden time" for West Papua because "the decision made by the Australian Government respected our rights".

"The visas are not for the 42 people, not for me. This is for the West Papuan people," he said.

Mr Wainggai repeated his call for Indonesia to act with maturity over the diplomatic rift between Australia and Indonesia over its granting of the visas. "We don't want Australia and Indonesia to argue, (to have) negative thinking."

He appealed to Indonesia to recognise the seriousness of the West Papua situation. "We would like to solve the problem in West Papua by peaceful means," he said.

Mr Wainggai repeated a claim by Melbourne Anglican minister Reverend Peter Woods, reported in yesterday's *Age*, that a university student "disappeared" during Indonesian reprisals in West Papua after he was taken out of a graduation ceremony last week.

He urged the Immigration Department to speedily process the case of his cousin, the 43rd asylum seeker, who was left behind on Christmas Island. Representatives of the Red Cross and the Victorian Foundation Against Trauma and Torture yesterday helped the refugees settle into temporary accommodation.