

What's wrong in Papua

Kenneth Davidson

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THE chief criticism of John Howard's decision to reinstitute the Pacific Solution to deal with the threat of hundreds of Papuans fleeing military persecution and economic dispossession is that, in his desperation for a friendly personal relationship with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, he is dealing with the symptoms of the problem, not the substance.

Surely the first question should be to determine what is causing the problem, not how Australia deflects the problem by buying space for refugee gulags in failing South Pacific states.

A large part of the answer can be found in an excellent report, *Environmental Impacts of Freeport-Rio Tinto's Copper and Gold Mining Operation in Papua*, published in May by the Indonesian non-government organisation WALHI, or Indonesian Forum for Environment. The report, so germane to the crisis now tearing the Coalition apart and consuming a huge amount of media attention, has received virtually no attention.

It is a story of corruption and environmental damage on a massive scale that are impoverishing the Papuan people who, when they protest about their dispossession, are put down by an Indonesian military paid by the company (with a substantial Australian interest via Rio Tinto) for protection.

It is the richest copper and gold mine in the world, extracting fabulous riches for its owners, managers and shareholders. Rio Tinto's profits from the mine alone in 2005 amounted to \$330 million. The mine is Indonesia's biggest taxpayer, paying Jakarta \$1.6 billion in 2005, but only a small fraction of this money reaches the Papuan provincial and local governments.

Millions more is syphoned off by the Indonesian military and officers who, in common with the military throughout Indonesia, are expected to be responsible

for raising 70 per cent of their operating budgets.

Despite the wealth produced by Freeport and other extractive operations throughout Papua, the province is the poorest and most environmentally degraded in Indonesia.

According to WALHI, "millions of hectares of unique rainforest have disappeared from legal and illegal logging operations and palm oil plantations in West Papua. Large numbers of indigenous Papuans have been displaced by the granting of timber concessions on their land, without compensation. Logging has contributed to increased flooding and forest fires ... while the loss of farm and crop lands left thousands facing starvation".

"Mining in Papua is particularly associated with environmental and human rights abuse of the worst kind, and has contributed to West Papua's ranking as the most polluted province in Indonesia," WALHI said.

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A key finding of the report is that Freeport-Rio Tinto has failed to comply with government orders to amend its dangerous waste management practices despite years of official findings that the company is in breach of environmental regulations. Nor has it made public any independent external audits since 1999, breaching its environmental permit requirements.

The report states that "the environmental destruction which surrounds PT Freeport Indonesia reflects a neglect for the law in the name of economy and because of political pressure, proof of the invulnerability of corporate power".

Injustice, environmental vandalism and moral turpitude on this scale cannot withstand public scrutiny. Unless the implicit genocide policy is reversed, global outrage will lead to Papuan independence irrespective of the preferences of the Australian pro-Indonesia lobby.

Both Yudhoyono and Howard know that announcements that Australia recognises Indonesia's claims to Papua must be seen against a background of public opinion, which is already overwhelmingly sympathetic to the plight of the Papuans. This was shown by a recent Newspoll that found 76 per cent of the respondents agreed with the proposition that "the people of West Papua should have the right to self-determination ... including the option of independence".

The recent history of Australia's official and popular attitude towards the independence of East Timor shows that in a democracy, public opinion based on perceptions of fairness and justice will eventually displace official policies based on Realpolitik. The film showing the Santa Cruz massacre of peaceful demonstrators by the Indonesian military in 1991 was the beginning of the end of Indonesia's occupation of East Timor.

Australia has nothing to gain from a flood of Papuan refugees attempting to escape political persecution by trying to reach Australia even if they can be successfully diverted to Nauru and other failed states that are prepared to take on Australian responsibilities in return for money, or, for that matter, from Papuan independence.

Above all, Australia must not become an agent for corruption throughout the region for a policy primed for failure. It is in both Australia's and Indonesia's long-term interests to make Papua a place fit for human beings who can be reconciled with Jakarta. But this means getting the military under control and getting Freeport-Rio Tinto to face its responsibilities. This means supporting Yudhoyono and other progressive democratic forces in Indonesia who are trying to rein in the military as well as using Australian leverage over Rio Tinto.

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