

Deathly silence

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July 6 was the anniversary of one of the shameful events in Australia's relationship with Indonesia. In July 1998 on Biak—a tiny island just north of Australia—the Indonesian military carried out a massacre of more than 100 people, mostly women. And to Australia's shame, despite an intelligence investigation confirming that it happened, the Australian government refused to condemn the massacre, and to this day has refused to release the report.

I was in Biak last year and although the island is visually a tropical paradise, the experience was disturbing. The scars of the horrific events that took place on July 6, nearly five years ago, have not healed. Nor have the scars of 40 years of constant, and at times deadly, intimidation by the Indonesian police and military. In Biak, perhaps more than any other place I visited in West Papua, the fear of Indonesian intimidation and violence is palpable. As I travelled around Biak with my wife, I felt it was eerily unlike other places we had been. Teenage girls and young women did not engage us with their eyes or a smile. Fear and shame were written on their faces.

West Papua, less than 200 kilometres from Australia, was handed over to Indonesia in 1963 following the New York Agreement. This ended a long-running dispute between the Netherlands and Indonesia over the former Dutch colony. In 1969 a hotly disputed vote by just 1025 Indonesian-picked Papuans confirmed that West Papua would remain part of Indonesia. This vote was recently called a 'whitewash' by the United Nations Under-Secretary-General who supervised the hand-over of West Papua to Indonesia.

The Papuan Women's Solidarity Group was established to support victims of the massacre. At a meeting of the group in Biak town, I was told that all Biak women live with the very real threat of physical or sexual violence every day, and have done so for 40 years. The women described the monthly dances in remote villages, organised by the military, that every young woman, including those who are married, must attend. At these dances, or after, often at their homes, the women are raped by the soldiers—and the families and husbands are powerless to do anything.

The day after this meeting, on a crowded public taxi driven by an off-duty member of Indonesia's paramilitary police BRIMOD I witnessed a minor example of the harassment that's commonplace on Biak. When a young village woman with a basket of freshly caught fish stepped out of the taxi at the local market, the driver reached across and helped himself to two fish from her basket.

The details of the 1998 massacre are overwhelming. More than 20 women and a few men, victims of or witnesses to the atrocities, crowded into the co-ordinator's house for the Papuan Women's Solidarity Group meeting. They told me that at 5am the army opened fire on a crowd of sleeping young people at the harbour, who had been guarding their Morning Star flag, raised a few days earlier. The entire population of Biak town was rounded up at gunpoint and forced to the harbour area, where for the whole day they were subjected to physical and sexual abuses, including the young children. More than 100 people—mostly women, some with babies and young children—were rounded up and forced on board two naval vessels, where they were stripped, killed and their bodies mutilated and dumped at sea.

Hundreds were detained in the police station and at an army base for three days after the massacre. Many of the wounded had to go back to their villages without medical attention because the military prevented the hospital from treating them. Many people are still missing.

The community of Biak Island had joined in the independence demonstrations that were taking place across West Papua in July 1998. There was greater openness and a feeling of hope following the overthrow of President Suharto, and new President Habibie had made encouraging moves toward dialogue over East Timor. The Biak women made flags and banners and a Morning Star flag was flown from the water tower at the harbour.

On 2 July, police and military made a tentative attempt to remove the flag and stop the celebrations, but withdrew because they were outnumbered by the demonstrators. More than 100 armed military reinforcements were brought in from Ambon, and at 5am on 6 July they began their military assault on the demonstrators and the population of Biak town.

A witness with a physical disability described how he was forced on board one of the naval vessels, but was thrown overboard by a sympathetic sailor as the frigate put to sea. He told how the women were stripped as the ship sailed out to sea. Nobody knows exactly what happened to the people on board, as no-one survived. In the weeks that followed, a church report claims that bodies floated ashore, some with limbs cut off, women with breasts removed, men with penises cut off. The bodies of two women washed ashore on an outer island—tied together at their legs with their vaginas crammed with newspaper. Churches on Biak have documented the recovery of a total of 70 bodies, including those of young children, that washed ashore or were recovered from fishing nets.

Sketchy reports about the massacre filtered out. But it was not until two Australian aid workers who were present during the massacre, Rebecca Casey and Paul Meixner, returned to Australia and told their story that a few reports began to appear in the Australian media. The Sydney Morning Herald ran a story in November 1998. The two aid workers did not witness the killings and beatings—they had been told by Biak friends to hide in a house for three days. The fate of five Australian journalists who witnessed the invasion of East Timor in 1975 must surely have been on their minds.

Despite having authorised an official intelligence report into the massacre—compiled by Major Dan Weadon, an intelligence officer attached to the Jakarta embassy—the Australian Government refused to publicly condemn the Indonesian atrocities. And despite attempts by the Australia West Papua Association, including an unsuccessful 'Freedom of Information' application, the Weadon report has never been made public.

In an article in the Sun-Herald in November 2001, Captain Andrew Plunkett, a serving intelligence officer with the Australian Defence Force, claimed that the Biak massacre 'was a dress rehearsal for the TNI [Indonesian army] in East Timor'. And, in what the Sun-Herald article described as a 'stunning and unorthodox attack on foreign policy by a serving officer', Captain Plunkett went on to accuse the Australian Government of 'giving a green light' to the Indonesian military's subsequent atrocities in East Timor 'by turning a blind eye and not raising an official public protest' against Indonesia's behaviour in Biak.

It's a testimony to the strength and integrity of Papuan people that despite the years of abuse by Indonesian security forces, they have maintained their 1988 pledge to pursue a non-violent struggle based, as they say, on 'love and peace'.

At the end of my meeting with the Biak women, they told me that they would like to be able to travel overseas and tell the story of the massacre to the outside world—a world that has, for 40 years, ignored the plight of these people. And as I was leaving, in a show of solidarity and defiance the women chanted Merdeka! Merdeka! Merdeka!—Freedom! Freedom! Freedom! ?

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