

Tongan PM speaks out for West Papua and questions solidarity and regionalism

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By Makereta Komai, PACNEWS Editor in Funafuti

Tonga's Prime Minister, Akilisi Pohiva has delivered a stinging attack against regionalism and the Pacific Islands Forum's stance of leaving no one behind, for failing to amicably resolve the issue of West Papua.

PM Pohiva admitted the issue has divided the 18 members of the Pacific Islands Forum for many years since it has been on the agenda of the Leaders meeting.

"Is regionalism a myth, is it real or based on reality, he questioned Leaders during the dialogue with the regional civil society organisations (CSOs) Wednesday in Funafuti.

PM Pohiva called out Indonesia – claiming it has a powerful influence over some members of the group – naming Fiji, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea.

"How can they reconcile the concept of leaving no one behind when they are friends with Indonesia?

"We should not let others control us. We should stand together in solidarity in support of the people of West Papua, said PM Pohiva.

There was pin-drop silence when the Tongan Prime Minister delivered his intervention responding to the regional CSO's call for a UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit West Papua.

"None of us can speak of an inclusive and peaceful Pacific and remain silent on the serious human rights issues for West Papuans. We call on Pacific Leaders to observe the importance of human rights in all parts of our region.

"We urge that Forum Leaders call on Indonesia to immediately allow access of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN special mandate holders to West Papua, said the CSO statement.

Civil society organisations also requested Indonesia to immediately restore the access of independent journalists in the region, so that the international community can have better access to the on-going human rights situation in West Papua.

Responding to the concerns of civil society organisations, Fijian Prime Minister Frank

Bainimarama said while Fiji hears the position of CSO's loud and clear on West Papua, it will be guided by the Leaders previous decision on the matter.

"Fiji fully respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states including Indonesia and we will always uphold the principles of the UN charter, said Bainimarama.

He said Fiji is concerned with alleged reports of human rights violation and will continue to advocate for the protection of the human rights of all West Papuans.

"This is a matter of life or death to many West Papuans and we must tread boldly – but thoughtfully – as we move forward as a region. Territorial disputes have fuelled war and chaos since the beginning of time and we must approach this situation with both caution and hope in finding a solution, said Bainimarama.

The Tongan leader warned that Indonesia is powerful and can challenge anyone in the Forum membership.

"We will never get a solution because Indonesia is so powerful. Our only weapon is to stand together in unity and in solidarity and support the people of West Papua, said PM Pohiva.

Samoa's Prime Minister, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi agrees that despite Forum Leaders taking a position over the years, the violations and challenges for the people of West Papua have not reduced.

"It keeps on increasing. We can't continue to ignore the violations of human rights against the people of West Papua. Its time that we review our position.

Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister reserved his government's position on the issue until the issue is raised at today's Retreat.

United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) spokesperson, Jacob Rumbiak was overcome with emotion to hear strong support from some Pacific leaders – particularly Tonga and Vanuatu.

"We are happy that it has taken the 50th session of the Pacific Forum Leaders meeting to see some positive movement in the Leaders of the Pacific. I am deeply appreciative of the great efforts of the CSOs for pushing this issue through their position to the Leaders, Rumbiak told PACNEWS here in Funafuti.

He paid tribute to the Prime Minister of Tonga for his powerful intervention.

"The response from Prime Minister Pohiva was the strongest so far and very powerful especially when he urged them to unite and stand up to Indonesia.

"This issue has been on the regional agenda for 10-15 years and it's not a domestic issue any more. It's now a regional issue and Leaders should now act on it," said Rumbiak.

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INDONESIA ANGER AS WEST PAPUA INDEPENDENCE RAISED AT PACIFIC FORUM

Breakaway leader Benny Wenda will use meeting in Tuvalu to push for UN vote on Jakarta's control of province

Ben Doherty. The Guardian, Mon 12 Aug 2019

Benny Wenda, the West Papuan independence leader, is hoping to gather regional support for his cause at the Pacific Islands Forum in Tuvalu this week. Photograph: Leon Neal/AFP/Getty Images
Human rights violations and political independence in West Papua are set to command debate at this week's Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), where Papuan independence leader Benny Wenda will urge government leaders to support the "Free Papua" campaign amid recent escalating political violence.

Exiled from Papua, but now an official representative attached to the Vanuatu government's delegation, Wenda is campaigning for a United Nations general assembly resolution next year that will re-examine the controversial 1969 Act of Free Choice vote that formalised Indonesian control of the province. West Papua Indonesian-controlled Papua and West Papua form the western half of the island of New Guinea. Political control of the region has been contested for more than half a century and Indonesia has consistently been accused of human rights violations and violent suppression of the region's independence movement.

West Papuan sources say violence in the region is worsening, protesters have been beaten and jailed, and there have been claims white phosphorous, a banned chemical weapon, has been used to attack civilians. This claim has been strenuously denied by Indonesia.

A spokesman for the Indonesian government said Jakarta was "not at all happy" West Papua had been included on the formal agenda for the forum leaders' meeting in Tuvalu, and warned the move would establish a precedent for interference in other countries' domestic affairs.

"Developments in Papua and West Papua province are purely Indonesia's internal affairs. No other country, organisation or individual has the right to interfere in them. We firmly oppose the intervention of Indonesia's internal affairs in whatever form."

The West Papuan delegation was expected to arrive for the forum at the weekend, but were unable to board flights to Tuvalu from Fiji. On Sunday, Enele Sopoaga the prime minister of Tuvalu, and Dame Meg Taylor, secretary general of the PIF, said they had no idea what had happened. It appears the problem was an administrative one on the part of the Vanuatu government, with whom the west Papuan delegation were meant to be travelling.

At a meeting of the region's foreign ministers last month, Vanuatu successfully pushed to have the issue of West Papua formally included on the Pacific Islands Forum agenda, over the vociferous objections of Australia.