

Eloquent voice for remote people; Lawyer honoured for work in West Papua

Under Indonesian rule, 'second-class citizens'

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West Papua is one of the world's most obscure territories, a rain-forested land that is little known except for its exotic beauty.

But human rights lawyer Yan Christian Warinussy says its indigenous people mainly experience the ugliness of poverty and repression, as they struggle for independence from the ruling Indonesian government.

Yesterday, Warinussy accepted one of Canada's highest honours for human rights advocates, the John Humphrey Freedom Award, from Rights & Democracy (International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development), based in Montreal.

In Toronto last week, the diminutive, soft-spoken Warinussy called on Canadians to oppose human rights abuses that he said have been "carried out with total impunity by members of Indonesia's armed forces" during Jakarta's 42-year rule in which thousands of native people reportedly have been killed by government forces.

He said the abuses include "torture, rape, summary executions, arbitrary arrests, disappearances, the killing of indigenous leaders and civilians alike, the displacement of indigenous populations and confiscation of their lands."

Since 1998, when Suharto's 32-year dictatorship ended, Indonesia has won plaudits for its efforts to democratize and its co-operation in the "war against terrorism."

But it has been plagued by corruption, massive unemployment and catastrophic terrorist attacks, as well as the dire effects of the Asian tsunami.

Indonesia claims that West Papua voted to join it in a 1969 referendum, and that the territory has been granted more rights under a "special autonomy" law. The fairness of the referendum has been disputed, and indigenous people insist they have reaped no rewards from their new status.

Bitterness has overflowed into violence with the rise of guerrilla groups, who are responsible for a number of attacks in West Papua. But human rights groups, including Amnesty International, point the finger at Indonesia for its repressive measures against indigenous people who are seeking their rights, or are victims of military purges.

"Nothing has changed for the better for the indigenous people," said Warinussy. "They are still very poor and unable to earn a living. Their land has been confiscated without compensation, and the industrialization of West Papua has not improved their lives. Those who ask for their rights are treated as militant separatists."

West Papua, a territory rich in oil, mineral and timber, occupies one of the largest land masses in the Indonesian archipelago.

For University of Toronto Professor Janice Stein, the political scientist who is chair of Rights & Democracy's board of directors, "the tragedy unfolding in West Papua is one that has gone unnoticed for too long."

Since it took over West Papua, the Indonesian government has settled the territory with Indonesians who were provided with jobs, housing and roads, raising tensions among the indigenous people, who feel increasingly disenfranchised. Indonesians now account for at least 40 per cent of West Papua's 2.3 million population.

"Indigenous people are second-class citizens in their own land," said Warinussy.

The 41-year-old lawyer began his campaign to defend indigenous rights while in university. The son of a civil servant in the former Dutch government, he grew up at the time of transition to Indonesian rule.

"I have received many threats and I accept that," he said. "I have been jailed for three months because the government didn't like my criticism."

In jail in 1998, he said, "they were very careful to treat the inmates humanely because they knew I was watching. But I learned how prisoners are really treated. It's not surprising that the police have little respect."

Warinussy said he was punched in the face during his detention and later denied family visits.

On another occasion, a police officer called him to a compound where six of his clients were being detained for raising the West Papuan flag.

An officer demanded to know why he had written a letter alleging police violence against some of his clients, and asked the jailed men to declare if any of them had been beaten. When one came forward, the officer drew his gun and said "If you make false reports, I will shoot you and your lawyer."

Some of Warinussy's clients fared worse. Daniel Yairus Ramar, 51, a teacher and tribal leader, was arrested on suspicion of murdering employees of a logging company working near his village. When two weeks later his battered body turned up in a local morgue, the police insisted he had died of natural causes, even though medical reports raised allegations of torture.

Warinussy said attacks on indigenous people who campaign for their rights continue, but he has no plans to abandon his struggle.

"If I had chosen to be a doctor and cured 100 people, I'd be sure to make 100 friends," he said with a smile. "As a human rights lawyer, if I help 100 people I also make 100 enemies. I'll continue as long as what I'm doing benefits the community."

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