Western Interests in the Indonesian Papua Conflict

Amid heated discussions of Brexit, another event stood out in the UK Parliament recently, as a motion was proposed which began collecting signatures, calling upon the UK Government to investigate reports which claim chemical weapons (white phosphorus) were used by the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) during an operation against militants in the Indonesian part of New Guinea, which Jakarta began following the Nduga massacre. The aim of this article is to take an objective look at what is happening, to find out why some British parliamentarians have decided to deliver such a démarche, and we will also look at the situation in this part of Southeast Asia, which Britain is trying to exploit to publicly justify its intervention in events around Indonesia.

In early December 2018, the mass killing of Indonesian construction workers took place in Nduga Regency, Papua, Indonesia, who were building a bridge. An armed Papuan separatist group killed 31 employees from the company Istaka Karya, which is working on the Trans-Papua motorway over Yigi River in the Yigi district of the Nduga Regency.

The Tentara Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat (West Papua National Liberation Army, TPNPB) claimed responsibility for the attack, which is the armed wing of the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (Free Papua Movement, OPM)—a militant organization established in 1963, which is fighting for the independence of the Papua and West Papua provinces from Indonesia.
Western New Guinea is currently Indonesia’s most troubled region. The construction of the 6,632 km long Trans-Papua road, 48 airports, 15 seaports and a large-scale infrastructural programme for electricity lines should provide powerful momentum to accelerate economic growth and improve the living standards of the local population. But the government’s intensive integration policy for Papua and its effort to enhance the transport connectivity of the key region has been met with a fierce backlash from rebels.

Western New Guinea (the island’s Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua) accounts for about 24% of the total area of Indonesia’s territory, while it is home to only 1.7% of the country’s population. It is also one of Indonesia’s poorest regions, despite the fact that the land is rich in natural resources, covered by Southeast Asia’s largest rainforests, huge oil and gas reserves, and the world’s largest copper and gold deposits.

That being the case, armed separatist conflict has gone on in Papua since the 1960s.

The Netherlands recognized Indonesia’s independence in December 1949 with the exception of former Dutch East Indies territory in Western New Guinea, citing significant differences in climate, geography and the region’s ethnic composition: it is inhabited by Papuans, who are ethnically different from Indonesians. Between 1949 and 1962, the region remained a separate part of Dutch colonial territory called Netherlands New Guinea. Nevertheless, the Dutch government promised to grant Western New Guinea independence following a transition period.

All of this led to the military confrontation which broke out between Indonesia and the Netherlands in 1960. Two years later, with mediation from the United States, both parties signed the New York agreement, under which Western New Guinea became Indonesian territory in 1963, on the condition that a plebiscite, a local referendum, would be held on the future of the Western New Guinea.

In 1969, there was no independence referendum, instead, 1,025 representatives of local tribes who had been specially selected by Indonesian authorities adopted the Act of Free Choice, according to which Western New Guinea officially became a part of Indonesia, which sparked the beginning of a protracted guerrilla war.

It is important to note that in 1967 (2 years prior to the referendum), Indonesia had sold a 30-year license for mining in Western New Guinea to the American company Freeport McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc.

Grasberg in the province of Papua is the largest gold mine and the second largest copper mine in the world. The giant Grasberg mine area is Indonesia’s largest economic entity and country’s top taxpayer.

However, the government of Indonesia only owned 9.36% of the shares in PT Freeport Indonesia up until recently, which plays a direct role in developing the mine, while 90.64% of the shares are owned by the previously mentioned Freeport McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc.

Following two years of negotiations, Indonesia became the main owner of PT Freeport Indonesia at the end of December 2018, having bought up most of the shares from the transnational corporations Freeport McMoRan Inc. and Rio Tinto at $3.85 billion. Today, the state-owned mining company Inalum (PT Indonesia Asahan Alumunium) owns 51.23% of shares, while Freeport McMoRan holds 48.76%.

These changes which have taken place over recent years have mainly affected mining and the oil and gas sectors, given that Indonesia is actively implementing a policy of resource nationalism, which requires foreign companies engaged in the mining sector forfeit majority stakes if they wish to continue doing business in Indonesia.

However, most of the country’s mining and processing enterprises are still owned by American, British and Japanese transnational companies.

British Petroleum (BP) has become Indonesia’s largest investor since the company undertook a project to develop the Tangguh gas field in the province of West Papua.

The Tangguh field contains over 500 billion cubic meters of proven natural gas reserves, and estimates of potential reserves reach 800 billion cubic meters.

British Petroleum is the main owner of the field, which holds 37% of its shares, and its other major partners are the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and the Japanese Mitsubishi Corporation. According to forecasts, this supergiant oil field which is worth more than $100 billion should ensure the supply of gas to Japan, South Korea and China for the next 30 years.

Given the massive interest Western international companies have in Indonesia’s Western New Guinea, it is important
that we highlight the links between outside forces and Papuan organizations and elements fighting for secession from Indonesia.

The Dutch laid the foundations of the current separatist movement in the 1950s, who established the Papuan Volunteer Corps, which paved the way for the previously mentioned Free Papua Movement. The movement received funding from Libya during the reign of Muammar Gaddafi, and militants were trained in the Philippines with the Maoist Guerrilla group New People’s Army.

According to reports from the Indonesian military, the separatists are currently receiving both makeshift (from the Philippines) and factory-made weapons, which are being delivered to the separatists by sea or through the territory of neighboring Papua New Guinea.

One of the most famous leaders of the Free Papua Movement, Benny Wenda, is the head of the self-proclaimed Republic Of West Papua and has been living in the UK since 2002. He has acted as a special representative of the Papuan people in the British Parliament, the United Nations and the European Parliament. In 2017, Benny Wenda was appointed as the Chairman for the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) - a new structure established in Vanuatu in 2014 by combining the three main political organizations that are fighting for the independence of West Papua: The Federal Republic of West Papua (Negara Republik Federal Papua Barat, NRFPB), the West Papua National Coalition for Liberation (WPNCL) and the National Parliament of West Papua (NPWP).

In June 2015, the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) received MSG observer status from the Melanesian Spearhead Group as representative of West Papuans outside the country. MSG is an intergovernmental organization composed of the four Melanesian states of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, as well as the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front of New Caledonia. Indonesia is recognized as an MSG associate member. The organization’s headquarters are in Port Vila, Vanuatu.

Vanuatu, a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations, passed the Wantok Blong Yumi Bill (Our Close Friends) in 2010, “officially declaring that Vanuatu’s foreign policy is to support the achievement of the independence of West Papua.” At the UN General Assembly in 2017, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands expressed their support for the people of West Papua to be allowed the right to self-determination.

Official representatives from Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Nauru, Marshall Islands, and Papua New Guinea periodically lobby the UN for the separation of West Papua from Indonesia based on the example of East Timor, whereby the United Nations sponsored the country’s act of self-determination.

Since these countries have very limited resources and opportunities for development, it is a well-known fact that they are often used by stronger players (countries and transnational companies) who try to achieve their objectives by establishing offshore destinations for companies for example, or by acquiring votes form island states in the UN.

In May 2017, eleven New Zealand parliamentarians from four political parties signed the Westminster Declaration, which calls for West Papua’s right to self-determination to be legally recognized through an internationally supervised vote.

But Britain is main hub for disseminating information in support of West Papua’s independence, where an organization was created called the International Parliamentarians for West Papua (IPWP). It is a cross-party group of politicians from around the world who support self-determination for the people of West Papua.

The political group is modeled on a similar group which furthered the independence movement for East Timor. Its main objective is to exert sufficient political pressure on the United Nations to prompt the review of the results of the 1969 Act of Free Choice in West Papua.

The International Parliamentarians for West Papua (IPWP) was established in 2008 at the British Houses of Parliament in London, and its speakers have included representatives from West Papua, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Britain, including Lord Avebury and Lord Richard Harris, in addition to a variety of human rights organizations. Benny Wenda is the head of the political group along with British Labor MP Andrew Smith and Lord Richard Harris.

A project was launched in Guyana (part of the British Commonwealth of Nations) by the International Lawyers for West Papua (ILWP), to work in conjunction with the International Parliamentarians for West Papua (IPWP), and to develop a legal framework for the self-determination of West Papua and descriptions which evidence the “illegality” of the Indonesian “occupation of West Papua”.
The Free West Papua Campaign was launched in Oxford in 2004. The campaign’s stated aims are to “spread awareness of the human rights situation in Western New Guinea and the independence aspirations of the Papuan people, through lobbying Governments and developing support throughout society.” The campaign now has permanent offices in Oxford (UK), the Hague (Netherlands), Port Moresby (Papua New Guinea) and in Perth (Australia).

It is worth mentioning that Britain intends to increase its influence in the region by sending three new diplomatic missions to Vanuatu, Samoa and Tongo in May 2019.

The increased activity around West Papua in recent years is due to a demographic shift currently taking place, which has seen new migrants become a majority in many districts of the Papua and West Papua provinces. This could jeopardize any hope of secession being achieved through an internationally supervised referendum on independence.

According to the 1971 census, 96 per cent of the population in Western New Guinea were Papuans out of a total population of 923,000. Indigenous Papuans now only represent 51.5 per cent of the population as a result of the Indonesian government’s transmigration program, which is the planned mass movement of landless families from Indonesia’s densely populated islands (primarily Java) to less densely populated areas. This is a major factor fueling the Papua conflict.

It is important to note that there were plans in the early twentieth century to have the territory of Western New Guinea reserved for white European settlement and people who became known as—Eurasians—the descendants of mixed marriages between colonizers and the indigenous population.

The first plan was developed in 1923 to transform Dutch New Guinea into settlement territory. In 1926, a separate Association for the Settlement of New Guinea was established (Vereniging tot Kolonisatie van Nieuw-Guinea), and in 1930, it was followed by Stichting Immigratie Kolonisatie Nieuw-Guinea (Foundation Immigration and Settlement New Guinea). These organizations regarded Western New Guinea as untouched, almost empty land which could serve as a new homeland for the local white population and their descendants, similar to South Africa within Africa.

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