

increases fiscal control from Jakarta. One of the amendments made it possible for the central government to unilaterally divide Papua into more provinces. The voices of formal Papuan representatives were again excluded and ignored in the decision-making process. The new provinces were legalized in fast-track procedures in June and November 2022, bringing the grand total to six Papuan provinces. Opponents are calling it a divide and rule tactic. They voice disapproval of the consequences, including costly new buildings and civil servant salaries. In addition, now six instead of two new Military Regional Commands (*Kodams*) will probably be installed, following another recent national plan to form *Kodams* in each of the country's 37 provinces. These contested *Kodams* are counter to the military reform agenda—an agenda that Indonesia embarked on 25 years ago—which would gradually phase out the TNI's territorial functions.

Freedom and fear

During my travels between 2010 and 2017, I didn't encounter open conflicts, just some raucous crowds in the towns during election time. Neither did I engage with soldiers or police, except at the airports and a few who popped up on the doorsteps of private homes, asking to photograph my ID. The inlands appeared peaceful, with hospitable and open-hearted villagers.

On an evening in Yulius's village, I gathered with a group of men in one of the homes. Out of the blue, one man asked me "What do you think? Are we free?" Free? Sidestepping a pro-independence interpretation, I answered a bit distantly about how they appeared to be free, living a rather peaceful,

healthy life and managing to be quite self-supportive.

I thought to myself about how Yulius's family had quite limited means, but did have access to schools, work, electricity via the communal generator, food and clean water. They had proudly shown me the village's instruments and an intricately made hexagonal platform for traditional music and dancing; they nurtured their culture. The villagers were all Indigenous Papuans, and they were adamant in keeping things that way. Yulius's family seemed to be free: masters of their own lives. But I knew that tens of thousands of other Papuans, such as the IDPs in the forests, were not free, and neither seen nor heard from.

I asked the men if they felt free. One said, "Yes, living so close to nature is a good thing. But it's like a snake—the head wants to move forward, but Jakarta is holding the tail."

In the last five years, reports of killings, of the armed and the innocent, have increased. In half a dozen conflict zones, fear is ubiquitous. The narrative includes forcibly disrupted demonstrations, arbitrary arrests, digital intimidation, internet shutdowns, more prisoners of conscience, gruesome murders, public buildings set afire, cruel sweeps and intensified reprisals. For example, a Papuan pastor was murdered in 2020. A few months later, an armed Papuan group killed the regional head of the Indonesian Intelligence Service (BIN), leading to the deployment of 400 Indonesian elite troops, the Satan Forces. Armed Papuan groups were labeled as 'terrorists', justifying new measures in accordance with the 2018 Terrorism Law, while escalating the conflict and delegitimizing the grievances about human rights abuses.

Mortar bombings from helicopters scarred villages in the fall of 2021. Security forces are accused of staging conflicts in order to create chaos and justify a larger military presence. Eight non-Papuan telecommunication workers and later eleven traders in a truck were shot in 2022. Conflict-related injuries and deaths occur monthly. The TNI and national police are taking over more local law enforcement tasks, and even civil tasks in schools. Soldiers and police continue to pour into Papua by the hundreds. A humanitarian pause agreed on in November 2022 failed. A New Zealander pilot was abducted in the Highlands in February 2023. Nine months later, he is still being held hostage by a Papuan separatist group demanding recognition of their call for independence. The central government has refused mediation offered by New Zealand.

Is Papua heading for more and massive atrocities? The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide published a report in July 2022, "Don't abandon us, preventing mass atrocities in Papua, Indonesia," assessing the risk of large-scale systemic violence against civilian populations in Papua over the next twelve to eighteen months. The first recommendation is "Improving freedom of information and monitoring of mass atrocity risks in the Papua region."

De-escalation and international responsibility

De-escalation in Papua is an issue for the national and the international communities. Both subscribe to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle. So, when the nation-state is



ABOVE Mothers and children at a rural *posyandu*
BELOW Village women, Bird's Head

