

# Restriction of Foreign Journalists and International Rights Monitors

Permanent Peoples' Tribunal on State and Environmental Violence in West Papua  
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**For at least four decades and likely much longer**, foreign correspondents and international rights monitors wanting to visit Indonesia's West Papua –with six provinces since June 2022– have had to apply for access through an interagency “clearing house,” supervised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and involving 18 working units from 12 different ministries, including the National Police, the State Intelligence Agency and the Military Intelligence Agency.

The clearing house has served as a strict gatekeeper, often denying applications outright or simply failing to approve them, placing journalists and international monitors in a bureaucratic limbo. In some periods, the process operated as a de facto ban on foreign media and international monitors in West Papua.

In November 2015, Human Rights Watch published a 75-page report, *Something to Hide?: Indonesia's Restrictions on Media Freedom and Rights Monitoring in Papua*. It documents how Indonesian authorities continue to restrict access by foreign journalists and rights monitors to West Papua, questioning the Indonesian government's commitment to media freedom and human rights.

The restrictions defy a May 10, 2015 announcement by Indonesia's President Joko Widodo – popularly known as Jokowi – that accredited foreign media would have unimpeded access to Papua.

His announcement, made in Jayapura, West Papua, while greeted by acclaim in some quarters, produced backlash in others. And it was not followed with an official presidential instruction, allowing room for non-compliance by government agencies and security forces opposed to the change. Various senior officials have since publicly contradicted the president's statement.

On August 26, 2015 Indonesia's Ministry of Home Affairs announced a new, even more restrictive regulation that would have required foreign journalists to get permission from local authorities as well as the State Intelligence Agency before reporting anywhere in the country. President Jokowi revoked the rule the following day and Minister of Home Affairs Tjahjo Kumolo subsequently apologized to the president for the “confusion” created by the now-canceled regulation. But the willingness of some senior officials to even consider such measures is an

alarming indicator of the disregard for media freedom among some elements of Jokowi's government.

In February 2018, during a visit by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, President Jokowi agreed to allow a UN team to visit West Papua. But the permission did not come through.

In June 2018, Zeid Al Hussein told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, "In Indonesia, I am concerned that despite positive engagement by the authorities in many respects, the government's invitation to my office to visit Papua – which was made during my visit in February – has still not been honored." It is still not honored until today with the Indonesian government playing delaying tactics.

Foreign diplomats and academics who do get permission to visit the region have been subjected to surveillance by the security forces. Those perceived to have pro-independence sympathies have been placed on visa blacklists.

The problem is not only limited to the barriers that keep monitors and foreign journalists out of West Papua, but also extends to the conditions facing those who get in, including surveillance, harassment, and at times, arbitrary arrest by Indonesian security forces. This is particularly true of journalists seeking to report on West Papuan social or political grievances or deforestation and land grabbing of the indigenous peoples.

In February 2018, Indonesian military arrested BBC correspondent Rebecca Henschke for tweets she made while reporting from West Papua. Henschke was questioned for a total of 17 hours by immigration and military officials before being freed in Timika, the mining town, in southern West Papua.

Henschke, based in Jakarta, went to Asmat, near Timika, to report on both the measles outbreak, which has killed roughly 100 indigenous Papuan children, and on how logging and deforestation have destroyed forests where the staple food, sago palm, grows, leading Papuans to eat more instant noodles and cookies. She had a travel permit, a requirement for foreign journalists traveling to Papua. She was exhausted after the long interrogation and decided to cancel the BBC reporting after her release.

While there are no comparable access restrictions for Indonesian journalists in West Papua, they too—particularly indigenous Papuan journalists—face serious obstacles to reporting freely on developments in West Papua's six provinces. Reporting on corruption and land grabs can be dangerous anywhere in Indonesia, but national and local journalists in West Papua say that those dangers are magnified in the six provinces and that, in addition, journalists there face harassment, intimidation, and at times even violence from officials, members of the public, and pro-independence forces when they report on sensitive political topics and human rights abuses.

Journalists in West Papua say they routinely self-censor to avoid reprisals for their reporting. That environment of fear and distrust is magnified by the security forces' longstanding and documented practice of paying journalists to be informers and even deploying agents to work undercover as Indonesian journalists. These practices are carried out both to minimize negative coverage and to encourage positive reporting about the political situation.

In addition to the obstacles facing journalists, staff members of international nongovernmental organizations, academics, and some foreign observers have been denied access to Papua. The security forces closely monitor the activities of international groups that the government permits to operate in West Papua—those that seek to address human rights concerns get particular scrutiny. Government documents leaked in 2011 revealed that the government and security forces routinely consider foreigners in West Papua to be assisting the armed separatist Free Papua Movement (Organisasi Papua Merdeka or OPM) through funding, moral support, and the documentation of poor living conditions and human rights abuses.

International NGOs that the government asserts are involved in “political activities” have been forced to cease operations, their representatives banned from travel to the region. Over the past decade, the Indonesian government has barred on-the-ground operations in West Papua of organizations including the International Committee for the Red Cross and the Dutch development group Cordaid.

The Indonesian government has legitimate security concerns in Papua stemming from periodic attacks, mainly targeting police and security forces, by OPM militants. However, the threat from an insurgency does not provide a legal justification for the broad-brush and indefinite restrictions on freedoms of expression, association, and movement that the Indonesian government has long imposed on West Papua. Any such restrictions, including those on non-nationals, must be based in law, narrowly construed in application and time to address a particular government concern, and proportionate to achieving a specific aim.

Past restrictions have far exceeded what is permissible under Indonesia's international law obligations. The government should promptly and officially end its restrictions on travel to Papua by foreign media outlets and nongovernmental organizations, and take all necessary steps to ensure that Indonesians and foreign nationals alike who go to Papua are not subjected to threats, harassment, arbitrary arrests, and other abuses.

Removing access restrictions alone, of course, will not resolve the underlying political tensions and conflict in West Papua or dispel the suspicions of Indonesian officials, but it is an essential step toward broader respect for rights: shining a light on West Papua, not keeping it hidden from view, is the best way to ensure the region has a rights-respecting future.