

Written testimony about the industrial exploitation of the West Papuan people

Professor Stephen Eichhorn, University of Bristol

Since 1969, following the botched independence process that led to a take-over of West Papua by the Indonesian authorities there has been a continued exploitation of the land, people and environment by mining companies, most notably Freeport, and also by oil palm plantation. It is worth noting that up to the late 1960s there was little interest from the US in West Papua, and not until serious amounts of copper and other minerals were found to be present in the ground. It is also the case that exploration of the mining potential by the US was carried out prior to any decisions were made on independence, making one think that possibly the whole process was influenced to ensure US interests were met.

Many acts of violence have been perpetrated against the indigenous West Papuan people since the late 1960s, aided and abetted by the Indonesian government. What is quite alarming is that these acts of violence, although carried out by Indonesian militia, have been wholly supported and financed by the mining company (Freeport). These are well-documented acts of 'violence', including forced displacement from the land, genocide, torture and rape. The link between the Indonesian government and the mining company (Freeport), complicit in these acts, was something that has been highlighted by Indonesia's Commission on Human Rights. The numbers of people that have been displaced to make way for the mining operations are staggering; some 41,851 between 2019 and 2020 alone, of whom around 200 have died from sickness, malnutrition, exhaustion and hypothermia. It is thought that upwards of 100,000 people have been displaced in total, but whatever the exact numbers are this is still a sizeable exodus of people connected to the land in ways that are now severed beyond repair. When Freeport signed their contract with Indonesia in 1967 they were not bound by any environmental conditions, giving them freedom to operate at will. While it is true that Freeport have invested heavily in infrastructure in the region of their main mine (the Grasberg mine), this could be argued to have exacerbated the destruction of the indigenous way of life of Melanesian people. Moreover, this approach is out of the classic colonisers' handbook, giving license to their operations with impunity. The extraction of metals, taken as one example of the extraction of materials from West Papua for profit, has been and is considerable – according to Freeport's own annual report this amounts to around £30bn in reserves (copper, silver and gold). All of this prevents the indigenous people of West Papua from gaining their own wealth from these reserves, but more importantly destroys their connections to the land, wildlife and the mountain that they consider sacred. Pollution of rivers in West Papua have been reported to have increased by a factor of 40 since 1950, all associated with the mining operations. The Amungme people describe the mountain on which the Grasberg mine sits as 'the sacred head of their mother and the rivers their milk'. The conditions of work (COW) that the mining company (Freeport) signed with the Indonesian government effectively allowed them to resettle any indigenous peoples away from their sites of interest, with little or no compensation.

The continued relationship between the occupier mining companies and the indigenous people, although by their self-declared statements of "improvement" still maintain this exploitative approach to their operations. Now the continued exploitation is assisted by various legislations and 'self-awarded' charters for responsible mining. Even in company reports as recent as 2019 Freeport consistently refers to West Papua as Indonesian territory, denying their existence or right to independence. They refer to indigenous peoples as "their neighbors", which patronizingly also denies their rights to the land, and more of an interest in their workforce and operations than the lives of those deeply affected by mining. Their approach to responsible mining is questionable,

since although they claim to be committed to The Copper Mark Responsible Framework. Given that the committee that oversees this framework includes members from the Freeport company itself, it would seem there is a very significant conflict of interest here. The framing of the responsibility of the mining operations enables the company to continue to exploit the land. It seems rather ironic that given the global increase in the use of elements like copper, as we drive towards a decarbonization of our energy in the name of sustainability that we would do this to the detriment of the cultural sustainability of indigenous people. There are models for how mining may end in West Papua. For instance Rio Tinto ceased mining on the island of Bougainville in the 1990s, having been ousted by the islanders. This resulted in a whole new industry, for the islanders, and by the islanders, around the use of coconut for basic products e.g. soap, coconut oil and fuel. These things can't be left to work themselves out, as was learned by the Singkep Islanders, who suffered massive losses in income following the ending of mining there. Other devastating environmental impacts can also occur, such as what happened when the Americans abandoned uranium mines in South Africa, leaving large piles of the element to pollute local rivers and drinking supplies. The de-escalation of mining, and the sourcing of alternative income streams are critical, but possible. The ongoing effects of the pollution caused by mining in West Papua will no doubt be felt for many years if the company ceases its operations. But cease it must.