

APR2P Statement on West Papua

The Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (APR2P) is concerned by the escalating conflict in West Papua and warns of a number of risk factors for future atrocity crimes.

Waves of protests have erupted in the provincial capitals of Jayapura and Manokwai and further afield since 19 August 2019. These were initially triggered by social media footage of racist slurs directed at students accused of disrespecting the Indonesian flag.¹ The Indonesian Government implemented an internet blackout with the justification of stopping ‘fake news’ and restoring order.² West Papuans say it was designed to stop the images of protesters and their treatment by Indonesian authorities reaching the rest of the world. In the wake of Indonesia’s military crackdown and reports of human rights abuses, protests have spread, renewing the longstanding West Papuan campaign for independence.

The widespread use of dehumanising language can sometimes be a precursor to violence against a particular group. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet has expressed concern and indicated ongoing discussions with the Indonesian Government, noting the “aspirations” of the people of West Papua and condemning internet shutdowns and escalating violence.³

Indonesia has sent thousands of extra forces into West Papua,⁴ and reports are continuing to emerge of human rights abuses and excessive force, including an incident where protesters were fired at, and six people were reportedly killed.⁵ Security forces have also used tear gas and mass arrests. Meanwhile, some pro-independence protesters have destroyed and torched buildings, and cut off roads with burnt tyres.

We call on all parties to show restraint and refrain from violence. In the immediate term, the Indonesian Government should ensure that it fulfil its responsibility to protect its populations from atrocity crimes. In the longer term, action should be taken to address problems of hate speech and incitement, and the underlying sources of atrocity crime risks.

¹ Indonesia Papua: Local parliament torched in Manokwari unrest, 19 August 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49394035>.

² Jennifer Robinson, “The escalating human rights crisis on our doorstep that no one is watching.” Sydney Morning Herald, 3 September 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-escalating-human-rights-crisis-on-our-doorstep-that-no-one-is-watching-20190903-p52ndj.html>

³ Comment by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet on Indonesia (Papua and West Papua), 4 September 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/indonesia/comment-un-high-commissioner-human-rights-michelle-bachelet-indonesia-papua-and>

⁴ Anne Barker, “Papuan race riots lay bare long-running tensions, fuelling push for independence from Indonesia”, ABC, 6 September 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-06/west-papua-fight-for-independence-fuelled-by-race-riots/11480524>

⁵ Tracey Shelton and Tasha Wibawa, “Why West Papua’s latest protests are different from the ones before,” <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-04/west-papua-latest-protest-over-referendum-for-independence/11471016>