

Indonesia Country-wide Risk: Medium West Papua Risk: High

COVID-19 has put particular stress on minority groups in Indonesia, most notably the Chinese-Indonesian diaspora. Since the outbreak of the pandemic there has been a rise in anti-Chinese rhetoric posted to social media and, in some cases, violent outbursts have occurred on the streets of Indonesian cities. Tensions have heightened due to Muslim clerics who blame the Chinese both for the pandemic, and for closing mosques due to social distancing rules.¹ Further, Islamic State (IS) affiliates have been using the pandemic to propagate the idea that attacks on civilians is immanent, ISIS suggesting the Indonesian government weakened by the pandemic and therefore unable to respond to a terrorist attack.²

A report by The Institute for Policy Analysis (IPAC) also suggests ISIS may use the virus as a weapon, infecting themselves and spreading the virus among “enemy” populations such as the Chinese minority, non-Muslim communities, or non-radical Muslim communities.³ Again, social media has played a significant role in inciting violence, and *The Jakarta Post*—reprinting a piece from *The Conversation*—has called on the Indonesian government to “implement strategic risk communication to curb fear mongering and racist sentiment on social media.”⁴ The government, realising the risks associated with xenophobic and fake news via social media, temporarily restricted internet and social media access in Jakarta in May as news spread that anti-Chinese protestors had been shot at and killed by Chinese police.⁵ This example of fake news was intended to incite further anti-Chinese sentiment.

Early estimates of the death toll in Indonesia due to COVID-19 were high, the University of Melbourne predicting 2 million infections and citing a figure of 250,000 deaths.⁶ This has not eventuated and governance remains stable, yet there remain fears of further virus outbreaks due to holidays ending, which traditionally means masses of Indonesians travel the country. If the virus escalates, and with it economic hardships result, some suggest government and civic instability. As reported in the *Financial Times*, the Indonesian government realises the widespread threat from Indonesians who are “plunged into poverty” due to economic restrictions due to the virus.⁷ Working to halt the spread of the virus is seen as limiting the risk of civil unrest due to the economic hardship it places on segments of Indonesian society.

¹ Llewellyn, Aisyah, “Coronavirus: Anti-Chinese Social Media ‘More Scary than Covid-19’ in Indonesia,” *This Week in Asia*, 22 Mar. (2020), <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3076221/coronavirus-anti-chinese-social-media-more-scary-covid>

² Chew, Amy, “Coronavirus: Indonesia Sees Uptick of Anti-Chinese Speech by Militants an on Social Media,” *This Week in Asia*, 7 Apr. (2020), <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3078775/coronavirus-indonesia-warned-be-guard-anti-chinese-terrorism-amid>

³ Anon, “COVID-19 and Isis in Indonesia,” *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*, 2 Apr. (2020), http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2020/04/COVID-19_and_ISIS_fixed.pdf

⁴ Sibarani, Rifka, Zemits, Birut, and Stephen Miller, “How to Communicate COVID-19 Risk Without Fuelling Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Indonesia,” *Jakarta Post*, 10 Mar. (2020), <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/03/10/how-to-communicate-covid-19-risk-without-fuelling-anti-chinese-sentiment-in-indonesia.html>

⁵ Hailin, Xu, “Jakarta Must Be Wary of Anti-Chinese Sentiment,” *Global Times*, 26 May (2019), <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1151687.shtml>

⁶ Phillips, Ben, “Getting the Numbers on Coronavirus in Indonesia,” *Indonesia at Melbourne* (blog), 9 Apr. (2020), <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/getting-the-numbers-on-coronavirus-in-indonesia/>

⁷ Connors, Emma, “Indonesia’s ‘New Normal’ Comes With Infection Risk,” *Financial Review*, 29 May (2020), <https://www.afr.com/world/asia/indonesia-s-new-normal-comes-with-infection-risk-20200528-p54x6r>

Recommendations

The Indonesian Government should:

1. Appoint a senior official as National R2P Focal Point to coordinate national and international efforts to implement R2P.
2. Ensure restricting the spread of COVID-19 remains a priority.
3. Censor the spread of racist, radical, and fake news on social media that causes civil unrest and incites violence against minorities.
4. Work to implement legislation to stop the spread of hate and danger speech across various mediums and outlets.

West Papua

The Indonesian Government is calling for harsh punishments for West Papuans involved in protests in 2019. Seven political prisoners have been moved from Papua for “security reasons” and are on trial for treason-related charges, which could see them sentenced for up to 17 years.⁸ Human rights groups have accused the government of trying to make an example of the activists to deter further uprising.

While foreign journalists remain banned from West Papua, in May 2020, ABC’s *Foreign Correspondent* reported on continued violence between independence activists and the Indonesian government, since the murder of 16 Indonesian road workers by activists in December 2018. The program interviewed West Papuans living in PNG who claim that 45,000 people have been displaced from Nduga, and accuse the government of murder, mass arrests, and burning of homes and villages.⁹ The ongoing fighting stems from a dispute over the construction of the Trans-Papuan Highway that will connect Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua, and which locals worry will allow further access by the military and the resource-extraction industry. In addition, West Papua is seeing an influx of Islamist jihadi groups aiming to take revenge against West Papuan independence activists.¹⁰ Meanwhile, pro-independence groups are reportedly recruiting child soldiers to the struggle.

A new research project aims to map the violence that has occurred in West Papua under Indonesian occupation, and has so far found that the majority of massacres have taken place in the West Papuan highlands, that many killings occurred during peaceful protests, and that perpetrators in the security forces are rarely held accountable.¹¹

COVID-19 is also adding to tensions, IPAC suggesting that the virus is exposing the shortcomings of the Indonesian government in the region. The report surmises that “the Covid-19 crisis has reinforced a

⁸ Anon, “Harsh Prison Sentences Sought for West Papuan Protestors,” *Radio New Zealand*, 6 June (2020), <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/418404/harsh-prison-sentences-sought-for-west-papuan-protestors>

⁹ Sara, Sally, Worthington, Anne, and Victor Mambor, “The Battle for West Papuan Independence from Indonesia has Intensified With Deadly Results,” *ABC News*, 12 May (2020), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-12/west-papua-secret-war-with-indonesia-for-independence/12227966>

¹⁰ Kingsbury, Damien, “Increasing Inroads and Growing Anger in West Papua,” *New Mandela: New Perspectives on South East Asia*, 22 Oct. (2019), <https://www.newmandala.org/increasing-inroads-in-west-papua/>

¹¹ Webb-Gannon, Camellia, Swift, Jaime, Westaway, Michael, and Nathan Wright, “Fight for Freedom: New Research to Map Violence in the Forgotten Conflict in West Papua,” *The Conversation*, 15 May (2020), <https://theconversation.com/fight-for-freedom-new-research-to-map-violence-in-the-forgotten-conflict-in-west-papua-128058>

sense of victimisation among Papuans that will only fuel more distrust.”¹² Rebel West Papuans have reacted to the virus by committing to much needed measures to stop the pandemic—such as spreading accurate information about the virus—so long as the Indonesian government releases West Papuan political prisoners. Therefore, the virus is being used by both sides to leverage political gain at the expense of the civilian populations.¹³

Recommendations

The Indonesian Government should:

1. Address entrenched racial discrimination, hate speech and incitement against West Papuans, and provide clear advice to security forces to abide by international law and refrain from the use of violence and torture.
2. As a member of the UN Human Rights Council, ensure human rights are protected in all Indonesian territories, including freedom to protest and gather, freedom of speech, and abolishing media bans or internet blackouts.
3. Ensure a fair and impartial judicial process for political prisoners.
4. Allow UN officials access to West Papua, such as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and consider an independent UN investigation into the conflict in Nduga.
5. Consider the aspirations of West Papuans and the underlying issues fuelling the protests.

All actors should:

1. Refrain from using COVID-19 for political gains at the expense of civilian welfare.

¹² Anon, “COVID-19 and Conflict in West Papua,” *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict*, 13 Apr. (2020), http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2020/04/Covid_in_Papua_2.pdf

¹³ Ibid.