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Indonesian crackdown on Papuan Congress sparks outrage

A joint statement by TAPOL (UK), the West Papua Advocacy Team (WPAT, US) and East Timor Action Network (ETAN, US)

On Wednesday, a meeting of thousands of indigenous Papuans in Jayapura, West Papua, became the scene of a brutal crackdown by Indonesian security forces. Indonesian troops and police Mobile Brigades reportedly fired hundreds of shots to disperse the crowd, pistol-whipped participants and beat them with batons and rattan canes. They arrested around 300 participants. According to the Indonesian press, security forces turned violent when Papuan indigenous leaders, who had gathered to discuss their basic rights, issued a declaration of independence.

“This appalling display of excessive force has no place in a modern democracy,” said Lord Avebury, Vice Chair of the UK Parliamentary Human Rights Group. Avebury called on the Indonesian government to immediately release detainees and conduct and publish a full investigation into the incident.

Two people are confirmed dead, with many more injured and five charged with treason. Among those arrested were Congress organiser Mr Selphius Bobii, and prominent indigenous leader Mr Forkorus Yaboisembut, head of the Papuan Customary Council (Dewan Adat Papua). The arrests are a provocative response to a peaceful gathering, targeting one of West Papua’s most respected tribal leaders, said the US-based West Papua Advocacy Team.

The meeting is the third of its kind to take place in West Papuan history, and was reportedly attended by around 4,000–5,000 people. While the Congress attracted thousands more to the surrounding area, many were prevented from gaining entry to the event by security forces, or were too afraid to enter.

“It is bitterly ironic that when Papuans meet to discuss their basic rights, Indonesia responds by violating those rights,” said Carmel Budiardjo, senior campaigner for the UK-based NGO TAPOL. “The daily discrimination and violations experienced by Papuans are bad enough, but an attack of this nature on a democratic congress is an absolute outrage,” she continued.

The use of the infamous ‘makar’ or treason laws to deny the right to freedom of expression and assembly is an increasing problem in Papua, suppressing activists and fuelling simmering resentments among the indigenous population. On Wednesday, US Congressman Mr Eni Faleomavaega expressed concerns about the arrests, calling for the immediate release of Mr Forkorus Yaboisembut. The US-based East Timor Action Network has also condemned the arrests. “The right to gather and speak out is a fundamental freedom, it doesn’t just disappear because the government doesn’t like what is being said,” said John M. Miller, the network’s National Coordinator.

The situation in Jayapura last night was tense amidst fears of reprisals and further actions by security forces against local residents and those involved in the Congress. [TAPOL, WPAT and ETAN call on the international community to urge Indonesia to show restraint, release the detainees, and commit to a peaceful resolution of the West Papua conflict.](#)

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Photos and video clips

Photos of victims available from TAPOL on request, including victims suffering gunshot wounds and beatings. Check [West Papua Media Info](#) for breaking news and video clips direct from West Papua.

Background notes for editors

The Third Papuan People's Congress

The Congress, [themed](#) 'Affirming the basic rights of the indigenous Papuan people for the present and the future' was planned to last for three days. It opened in Abepura, Jayapura, on 16 October 2011 with between [4,000](#) and [5,000](#) delegates in attendance representing more than [200 tribal groups](#) from across the territory. Over [20,000 more](#) gathered in the vicinity of the Congress. The organisers were forced to hold the event in an open field as requests to hold it at a more suitable venue were [rejected](#).

For the first two days the Congress proceeded peacefully, but the atmosphere was increasingly tense due to the build-up of [over 2,000](#) members of the security forces in Jayapura. According to local sources reported by [West Papua Media Info](#), troops encircled the conference with around 70 vehicles including Army Pansers, a water cannon, Armoured Personnel Carriers and Barracuda armoured jeeps. On the third day at the close of the conference, Indonesian troops armed with automatic weapons, along with units of Brimob, the notorious mobile brigade of the Indonesian police, reportedly [opened fire](#) in an attempt to disperse the Congress.

History of the Papuan People's Congress

The [First Papuan People's Congress](#) was held on October 16–19 in 1961, and issued a [manifesto](#) declaring their independence. The Second Congress held in May–June 2000 issued a [resolution](#) which affirmed their sovereignty as a people and led to the establishment of the representative body, the Papuan Presidium Council (PDP). Just over a year later, in November 2001, the PDP chairman, Theys Eluay was kidnapped by a unit of Indonesia's Kopassus Special Forces and [assassinated](#). In a travesty of justice which characterises the problem of impunity for security forces in Indonesia, the perpetrators were [sentenced](#) to between two and three and a half years.

Elsewhere in Papua: strikes at Freeport

At the same time as the Congress was underway, thousands of Papuan workers employed by the massive Freeport copper-and-gold mine in West Papua [continued](#) their strike to demand a substantial rise in wages. The strike, which has [hit production](#) at the multibillion dollar company, which is losing [millions](#), has been met by security force violence. Since the late 1970s Freeport has been the largest taxpayer to the Indonesian state, while the majority of Papuans continue to live in dire poverty: the Papuan provinces remain the [poorest in Indonesia](#).

West Papua Conflict

One of the world's longest-running conflicts, the independence struggle between the Free West Papua Organisation (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, OPM) and the Indonesian state has been raging for 48 years, since Indonesia took control of West Papua on 1 May 1963. The conflict escalated when West Papua was formally incorporated into Indonesia following the controversial [Act of Free Choice](#) in 1969.

Recent context

A period of heightened political activity in the middle of 2011, including the holding of a [Papua Peace Conference](#) in Abepura from 5-7 July and calls for dialogue with the central government, generated positive signs that tentative progress is being made towards resolving the Papuan problem, but was followed by a series of [violent incidents](#) and human rights violations. The outcomes of the Peace Conference, organised by the Jaringan Damai Papua (Papua Peace Network) led by Father Neles Tebay, provided an [aspirational agenda](#) for a peaceful Papua with a series of 'Indicators of Papua, Land of Peace.'

Note: The term West Papua covers the whole territory of West Papua, which in 2003 was divided into two provinces: Papua and West Papua.