

For Immediate Release:

The issue of human rights violations and self-determination in West Papua rose to its highest international level in nearly fifty years, as a coalition of Pacific Island nations raised the case of the Indonesian-ruled territory at the 79-member Africa, Caribbean, Pacific Group of States and asked the assembled governments to join their advocacy.

3 May 2017

Brussels, Belgium - The Pacific Island nations of Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Nauru, Palau and the Marshall Islands delivered a hard-hitting joint statement today condemning Indonesia's human rights violations, including crimes against humanity, at the Council of Ministers of the 79-member Africa Caribbean Pacific Group of States (ACP) and called for an eventual resolution that includes support of the right of West Papuan political self-determination.

The statement, made by Johnny Koanapo, a high-ranking member of the Republic of Vanuatu parliament and Parliamentary Secretary for the Office of the Prime Minister, transfixed the packed council room as he graphically described Indonesia's violations and West Papuans' "slow-motion genocide."

West Papua, the western half of New Guinea, the world's second largest island, has been under Indonesian rule since the 1960s.

Koanapo said that the seven Pacific nations were "very concerned [that] the international community had neglected the voices of the Papuan people over the last 50 years."

The ACP, he stated, was the right place to seek further support for the plight of West Papua because African and Caribbean countries are "the oldest defenders of West Papua's right to self-determination" and consistently tried to defend the Melanesian West Papuans as they "were passed from one colonizer to another" more than a half century

ago. The ACP, which was founded in 1975, is comprised of almost all former colonies itself.

As some among the hundreds of country delegates and staff nodded in strong agreement, Koanapo called Indonesian governance and massive state-backed settlement an “Apartheid-like colonial rule” that was “slowly but surely” going to wipe out the West Papuans as a people “while... the world stood by.”

Estimates of indigenous West Papuans killed during Indonesia’s rule range from 10 and 25 percent of the population, he said, several hundred thousand people. He added that Indonesia’s own National Commission on Human Rights has described its country’s actions as crimes against humanity.

Koanapo contended that according to numerous reports “those deaths and all the associated acts – the violent arrests of non-violent protestors, the beatings, the torture, rape, disappearances, extra-judicial executions, intimidation of the local Papuan media, the barring of foreign media from the territory – have continued through the 20 years of [Indonesian] democracy.” However, Koanapo added: “this forgotten race [is] still fighting.”

Under a policy of state-supported population movement, more than two million Indonesians have also settled in the territory. They now outnumber the indigenous Papuans and dominate the economy and almost every arena of life in the cities, towns, coastal areas and growing zones of mining, logging, gas and oil production and plantation agriculture.

After the meeting, Koanapo stated that the day’s discussion “now sets up the great likelihood of a resolution on the full range of West Papua issues at the next ACP ministerial council meeting”, which is scheduled for this coming November. A number of ministers and ambassadors later approached Koanapo to thank him for his “extraordinarily powerful” speech.

During the past several years, the coalition of Pacific Island nations, echoing the West Papuans, has argued in regional and international venues that Indonesian violations will not be ended by focusing just on human rights. There needs to be a proper act of self-determination or the conflict, which damages Indonesia, as well as West Papua, will continue indefinitely. The ACP appears to be coming to the same conclusion.

This is the fourth round of ACP discussions and sharing of information on West Papua. ACP meetings at the subcommittee and ambassadorial level during the past two months have elicited almost universal affirmations of strong support for West Papuan self-determination among delegates from Africa and the Caribbean.

At today's Council of Ministers, the Papua New Guinea ambassador Joshua Kalinoe, whose country shares a 760km-long border with its powerful Indonesian neighbour, was the only delegate to speak against ACP moving forward on such a resolution in the months ahead. The PNG ambassador conceded that "no one is denying that the human rights violations are going on." He suggested that a fact-finding mission to West Papua might be necessary for the ACP to get a clearer picture of the situation.

Ambassador Alfredo Lopez Cabral from Guinea-Bissau spoke directly after the PNG ambassador, comparing the plight of West Papua to East Timor, which Indonesia violently invaded and occupied for 24 years. More than one quarter of East Timor's population reportedly died as a direct result of Indonesian rule. Guinea-Bissau and other former Portuguese African colonies were leaders in the long campaign on behalf of East Timor, which had earlier been a colony of Portugal, and is now the independent country of Timor Leste. Ambassador Cabral said that there was "no reason why the ACP shouldn't take up the issue and help" West Papua gain a similar referendum on independence to what East Timor finally received after the fall of Indonesia's Suharto dictatorship in 1998 and mounting international pressure.

West Papua, a former Dutch colony, has been an official part of Indonesia since 1969, when Indonesia undermined the referendum among hundreds of thousands eligible West Papuans that was stipulated in the 1962 bilateral treaty transferring the territory to provisional Indonesian administration.

West Papuans have long argued that they are geographically, racially and culturally part of the Melanesian Pacific, not Asian Indonesia. During the 1940s and 1950s, even leaders of the Indonesian independence movement, such as Mohammed Hatta, his country's first vice-president, stated that Papua had not been part of the Indonesian struggle and needed to become a separate nation. At the time, observers expected West Papua to become the first independent Pacific Island nation.