

# West Papua: the OPM, the TPN-PB and the terrorist label

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## **The beginnings of the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM)**

The Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM) first emerged in the 1960s after the Netherlands and Indonesia signed the [New York Agreement](#).<sup>1</sup> The name referred to a group of people supporting the liberation of West Papua. It is translated as “Free Papua Movement” or “Free Papua Organisation”. While some clearly defined organisations also claim the name OPM, for many indigenous Papuans, it is rather a cultural spirit of resistance with which many West Papuans identify themselves. An OPM supporter would then be any Papuan who supports or sympathises with a liberation struggle or merdeka, freedom or independence for West Papua from Indonesia. [In 2002, Kirksey & Roemajauw](#) called the OPM “the most important force uniting resistance in West Papua... which “can be conceived of as a cultural world view”.<sup>2</sup> In her upcoming book, Dr Camelia Webb-Gannon describes the OPM as “perhaps the most difficult faction [of the independence movement] to define, given its huge symbolic significance to West Papuans”. “At a certain level, the OPM is representative of the entire independence struggle: most West Papuans identify at least loosely as part of the OPM”.<sup>3</sup>

In a more narrow sense, the term OPM refers to political and military organisations established in 1965 in Manokwari. According to Research Professor Dr Cahyo Pamungkas from the [Indonesian Institute of Sciences](#) (LIPI), the Indonesian government used the term in 1965 referring to the ex Papuan Volunteer Corps (PVK, Dutch: Papoea Vrijwilligers Korps) led by Sergeant Ferry Awom, who attacked the Indonesian Battalion 753 at Arfai, Manokwari. The term was used again in 1971 when the government labelled the separatist group led by Seth Rumkorem and Jacob Prai as OPM.

## **Finding a name and a common approach**

The armed wing of the OPM, the Tentara Pembebasan Nasional (National Liberation Army), abbreviated TPN, was established on 26 March 1973 as a result of the Proclamation of the Republic of West Papua in 1971. The proclamation was led by OPM leaders Rumkorem and Prai.<sup>4</sup>

In 1985, nine years after Seth Rumkorem and Jacob Prai fled to exile, Mathias Wenda changed the name of the OPM to Tentara Pembebasan Nasional (National Liberation Army) - Organisasi Papua Merdeka (TPN-OPM). The word ‘TPN’ indicates that the group is the military wing of the OPM, the political organisation. In 2006, there was an agreement among the TPN-

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<sup>1</sup> Agreement Between the Republic of Indonesia and the Kingdom of the Netherlands Concerning West New Guinea (West Irian), signed at the Headquarters of the United Nations, New York, on 15 August 1962

<sup>2</sup> S. Eben Kirksey & J. A. D. Roemajauw (2002) The Wild Terrorist Gang: The Semantics of Violence and Self-determination in West Papua, *Oxford Development Studies*, 30:2, 189-203, DOI: 10.1080/13600810220138294

<sup>3</sup> Webb-Gannon, Camellia. In Press. *Morning Star Rising: The Politics of Decolonization in West Papua*. University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu, 122

<sup>4</sup> Republic of West Papua (last edited 19.5.2021), in Wikipedia at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic\\_of\\_West\\_Papua](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_West_Papua)

OPM commanders, led by Richard Joweni, to change its name to *Tentara Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat* (TPN-PB) or West Papua National Liberation Army. TPN-PB members claim to serve the West Papua nation, not any one political organisation. After Richard Joweni passed away in 2015, most new TPN-PB commanders, belonging to a younger generation of West Papuan warriors, established the national command of TPN-PB, which now continues the armed struggle in the central highlands of West Papua. However, a remaining small group of the TPN-OPM based along the Papua New Guinea - Indonesian border rejects the new name, TPN-PB. They have retained the name TPN-OPM and affiliate with the OPM, now led by Jeffrey Bomanak Pagawak. According to Dr Webb-Gannon, “the OPM has lost its strategic and political monopoly on the struggle as its founders, mostly members of the first generation have aged, moved overseas or died” (reference Morning Star Rising). LIPI referred to the OPM as a political and armed Papuan Freedom Organization in their conflict analysis of 2004, [Pemetaan peran & kepentingan para aktor dalam konflik di Papua](#).<sup>5</sup> Since then, however, “a number of OPM members have committed (publicly at an August 2004 meeting in Wewak, PNG) to nonviolent resistance”.<sup>6</sup>

According to Dr Webb-Gannon, the TPN-PB, for a long time, acted as the armed wing of the OPM, the original independence-seeking organisation in West Papua. “Since 2001, the OPM, in general, has committed to seeking independence using nonviolent methods. Nevertheless, the TPN-PB remains a part of the OPM because violent struggle remains acceptable to many members of the OPM as a method of last resort. All members of the TPB-PB belong to the OPM, but not all members of the OPM (most Indigenous West Papuans) belong to the TPN-PB”.<sup>7</sup>

The TPN-PB organises armed attacks against Indonesian security forces, notably the Indonesian National Army (TNI), as well as against individuals it sees as acting for or on behalf of the Indonesian National Army (TNI) or other security forces. Dr Pamungkas explains that he considers the TPN-PB not as a terrorist organisation but as freedom fighters, although they also killed civilians suspected of spying for Indonesian armed forces and police.<sup>8</sup>

### **“Terrorists” - Jakarta considers OPM/TPN to be an anti-government organisation**

To the Indonesian government, the OPM is an armed criminal separatist group. How the Indonesian government frames the OPM in the public sphere has been changing through the years. It has been called *Kelompok Separatisme Bersenjata* (Armed Separatist Group), *Gerakan Pengacau Keamanan* (Security Disruption Movement), *Gerombolan Pengacau Liar* (Wild troublemaker gang) and lately *Kelompok Kriminal Bersenjata* (Armed Criminal Group). In recent years, the pressure to establish the OPM as a terrorist organisation has been voiced by various parties, including the former Head of the State Intelligence Agency in 2019.

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<sup>5</sup> Private interview with Mr Cahyo Pamungkas, Research Professor in the Centre of Area Studies of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI)

<sup>6</sup> Webb-Gannon, Camellia. In Press. *Morning Star Rising: The Politics of Decolonization in West Papua*. University of Hawai'i Press: Honolulu, 122

<sup>7</sup> Private interview with Dr Camellia Webb-Gannon, Researcher and Lecturer with the School of Health and Society at the University of Wollongong and Coordinator of the West Papua Project

<sup>8</sup> Private interview with Mr Cahyo Pamungkas, Research Professor in the Centre of Area Studies of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI)

In March 2021, the Chief of the National Counter-Terrorism Agency of Indonesia (BNPT), Commissioner General Pol. Boy Rafli Amar, proposed that the OPM/TPN be categorised as a terrorist organisation.<sup>9</sup> The killing of Papua Intelligence Chief, I Gusti Putu Danny Nugraha Karya, in Puncak Regency, Papua Province on 25 April, for which members of the TPN-PB claimed responsibility, provided the impetus to action this proposal. One day after the killing, President Joko gave the order to Indonesian Military (TNI) commander, Hadi Tjahjanto, and National Police Chief, Listyo Sigit Prabowo, to find and arrest all members of armed criminal groups (Kelompok Kriminal Bersenjata: KKB) in West Papua. Bambang Soesatyo, Speaker of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), urged the government to deploy forces at full strength. He was quoted in the media as saying, "Destroy them first. We will discuss human rights matters later".<sup>10</sup>

Human rights organisations criticised his statement. Usman Hamid, Director of Amnesty International Indonesia, said that Soesatyo's statement has the potential to [encourage an escalation of violence](#) in Papua and West Papua: "Human rights are constitutional obligations, so they must be a priority in every state policy. Putting aside human rights is not only against international law but also unconstitutional".<sup>11</sup> The Australian West Papua Association's Joe Collins says these sorts of statements can cause an escalation of violence, leading to the [security forces conducting military sweeps](#) in the area.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless, on 29 April 2021, the Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, Prof. Mahdud MD [announced during a press conference](#) that the armed criminal group in West Papua had been categorised as terrorists. He didn't name any particular group, only referred to an armed criminal group (KKB).<sup>13</sup> "Based on this definition, activities by the armed criminal group under whatever name, its people and those affiliated with it are classified as the act of terror," Mahfud said.<sup>14</sup> Indonesia's counter-terrorism law allows authorities to detain individuals without charge for up to 21 days and intercept communications of those suspected of planning or committing "terrorist" acts.<sup>15</sup>

### **Further Violence in West Papua feared**

On 30 April 2021, the diplomatic board of the TPNPB-OPM declared in a [press release](#) that Indonesian security forces are committing crimes against humanity and acts of genocide in

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<sup>9</sup> Suara Papua (23.03.2021): KKB dan OPM akan Diusulkan Jadi Organisasi Teroris di Papua, available at: <https://www.suara.com/news/2021/03/23/055152/kkb-dan-opm-akan-diusulkan-jadi-organisasi-teroris-di-papua>

<sup>10</sup> BernarNews (26.04.2021): Indonesian President Orders Crackdown after Papua Rebels Kill Regional Intelligence Chief, available at: <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/indonesian/general-killed-papua-04262021151413.html>

<sup>11</sup> CNN Indonesia (26.04.2021): Amnesty Kritik Ketua MPR Abaikan HAM Tumpas KKB Papua, available at: <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20210426172354-20-635008/amnesty-kritik-ketua-mpr-abaikan-ham-tumpas-kkb-papua>

<sup>12</sup> Radio New Zealand (27.04.2021): Fears of major military crackdown in Papua, available at: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/441298/fears-of-major-military-crackdown-in-papua>

<sup>13</sup> Kelompok Kriminal Bersenjata (KKB) or armed criminal groups is how the Indonesian government refers to separatists groups in West Papua

<sup>14</sup> Jakarta Globe (29.04.2021): Indonesia Labels Papua Separatists as Terrorists, available at: <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/indonesia-labels-papua-separatists-as-terrorists>

<sup>15</sup> Reuters (29.04.2021): Indonesia designates Papuan separatists 'terrorists', available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-designates-papuan-separatists-terrorists-2021-04-29/>

West Papua. The statement emphasises that “the TPN-PB freedom fighters never attack the Indonesian civilian population; however, if Indonesia continues their programme of terror and genocide upon West Papua’s civilian population (as has occurred for nearly sixty years now) and the international community does not intervene, OPM’s TPN-PB freedom fighters will announce a campaign to wipe out not just the illegally occupying Indonesian military but also the illegal Javanese and other Indonesian settlers who increasingly steal the sacred land and resources of the West Papuan people”.<sup>16</sup>

The Governor of Papua Province, Lukas Enembe, reacted through a [statement](#) that condemned the crimes committed by the TPN-PB but called upon the central government to reassess the decision. He suggested the military and police conduct a comprehensive mapping of the TPN-PB to identify the distribution, troop strength and organisational structure of the TPN-PB. The mapping is essential to avoid arbitrary arrests and killings of civilians. The Governor recommended the central government discuss the labelling of the TPN-PB with the UN Security Council.<sup>17</sup>

Human rights groups also reacted critically to the terrorist labelling. The Vice-Coordinator of Jakarta-based NGO KontraS, Rivanlee Anandar, stated that “the label is nothing more than an [attempt to silence voices](#) demanding justice in Papua... and will certainly worsen conditions in Papua.”<sup>18</sup> Joe Collins of the Australian West Papua Association (AWPA) said in an [interview](#) that “any West Papuan could be arrested on the whim of security force personnel. It could also be used against civil society groups in West Papua protesting against human rights abuses, environmental destruction and to curb free speech and the media.”<sup>19</sup> Warpo Wetipo, from the largest pro-independence movement organisation in West Papua, the West Papua National Committee (KNPB), shared this view and stated that the lack of a clear definition would serve as justification to silence and criminalise civil society in West Papua.

Catholic institutions, such as the Timika Diocese and the Archdiocese in Brisbane, Australia, published press releases in response to the recent political developments. The Brisbane Archdiocese [media statement](#) echoed the calls of Papuan church leaders for international intervention to set an end to the violence which has aggravated in the Papuan highlands throughout the past years. The Timika Diocese emphasised its rejection of the terrorist label, arguing that the statement will cause further restrictions on fundamental freedoms and democratic space in West Papua.<sup>20</sup> The West Papua Council of Churches voiced its concern

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<sup>16</sup> Diplomatic Board of TPNPB-OPM Free Papua Movement (30.04.2021): Press release, available at: <https://freepapuumovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/20210430-OPM-Press-Release-DRAFT-1.pdf> - [1.pdf](#)

<sup>17</sup> Suara Papua (29.04.2021): Gubernur Papua: Label TPNPB Teroris Harus Dikaji Ulang, Konsultasi ke PBB, available at: <https://www.suara.com/news/2021/04/29/210746/gubernur-papua-label-tpnpb-teroris-harus-dikaji-ulang-konsultasi-ke-pbb?page=all>

<sup>18</sup> Tempo.co (29.04.2021): KontraS Reveals Adverse Implications of Labeling Papua KKB Terrorist, available at: <https://en.tempo.co/read/1457623/kontras-reveals-adverse-implications-of-labeling-papua-kkb-terrorist>

<sup>19</sup> Suara Papua (30.04.2021): AWPA condemns statement from Indonesian officials on situation in West Papua, available at: <https://suarapapua.com/2021/04/30/awpa-condemns-statements-from-indonesian-officials-on-situation-in-west-papua/>

<sup>20</sup> International Coalition for Papua (2.5.2021): Indonesian Govt labelling Papuan resistance groups as terrorists earns widespread criticism, available at: <https://www.humanrightspapua.org/news/33-2021/793-indonesian-govt-labeling-papuan-resistance-groups-as-terrorists-earns-widespread-criticism>

over the escalating situation in West Papua through an [open letter to President Jokowi](#). The WPCC pointed out that there is no evidence the OPM engages in such attacks and warns of the risk that such attacks may in the future even be caused by Indonesian security forces to blame the OPM falsely and prevent international human rights monitoring then.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> International Coalition for Papua (17.5.2021): West Papua Council of Churches voices concern over the escalating situation in Papua, available at: <https://www.humanrightspapua.org/news/33-2021/807-west-papuan-council-of-churches-voices-concern-over-the-escalating-situation-in-papua-papua>