



MEDIA FOCUS: Australian West Papuan campaigner Joe Collins tells the story of 43 asylum seekers.

No watchdogs for West Papua

A four-hour flight from Auckland will take you to a place devastated by Aids, human rights abuses, alleged genocide and war. Why don't Kiwis know what's happening in our Pacific backyard? DIANNA VEZICH reports.

West Papua is a "country" that has seen more deaths than any other Pacific nation since World War Two, says Radio New Zealand International news editor Walter Zweifel.

The region is worrying United Nations officials over allegations of genocide.

"It's the longest running war in the Pacific. People keep dying, and the conflict needs to be resolved," says Zweifel.

Imagine living in a place where you can be imprisoned for 15 years for raising your national flag? Where the rate of HIV/Aids is so high, medical experts worry the pattern will emulate Africa?

West Papua. It's a nation in our backyard, but the conflict there is largely unheard of by most New Zealanders.

Indonesia has ruled Papua as a province since 1963 and the dictating Indonesian military are accused of many human rights abuses in the region.

Media have the role of "watchdog" for a reason. They have the job of informing the public about wrongdoing in our world, while staying objective and impartial.

Although the conflict has spanned more than 40 years, New Zealand's media have failed to report sufficiently on the issue.

AUT University last month hosted a conference on the "hidden conflict" in West Papua. Organised by the Indonesian Human Rights Committee, the conference aimed to create awareness of the situation in West Papua.

One leading speaker at the conference was Papuan Baptist leader Rev Socrates Sofyan Yoman, who called for New Zealand to help bring peace to his country.

"The Papuans are marginalised in their own land. The international community does not know this because the Indonesians always give them the wrong information," he says.

"I've come here to create awareness about the arrests, violence, torture and attacks that are happening to our local people."

"As the Maori people say, we need our mana."

The only media to cover the West Papuan issue were AUT journalism students reporting for *Te Waha Nui* and Static FM, Triangle Television and Radio New Zealand International.

Indonesian Human Rights Committee spokesperson Maire Leadbeater approached a variety of mainstream media outlets in hope of getting coverage.

"I sent press releases to TVNZ's *Breakfast* show, Radio New Zealand's *Nine*



CALLING FOR PEACE: Rev Socrates Sofyan Yoman speaks to AUT Pasifika student adviser Isabella Rasch about the situation in West Papua.

to *Noon* show and to the *Listener* magazine well in advance of the conference."

"The *Listener* said 'no', and no reason was given. *Breakfast* said 'no', and I didn't hear back from Radio New Zealand's *Nine to Noon*," says Leadbeater.

Leadbeater also liaised with the *New Zealand Herald's* Pacific issues reporter, Angela Gregory, about covering the conference.

"She was interested but said she was unable to cover it because of time constraints, and was busy covering the possible death of the King of Tonga."

Leadbeater was referred to the *Herald's* chief reporter, but says she never heard back from him.

Gregory says it was a problem of not having enough time and other news taking priority.

"It was a simple problem with breaking news of the King of Tonga possibly dying, and I was trying to finish a feature, and just couldn't do both."

"Some weeks there is too much news and I have to do the most obvious stuff first," she says.

"How can you expect ordinary people to engage in issues like West Papua, when

they're not hearing about it?" asks Leadbeater.

She believes most New Zealanders know little about West Papua and blames the media for this.

Sunday presenter Cameron Bennett says his knowledge on West Papua is limited.

"We have to find a connection to the story that will be of broad interest."

"The more obscure the place, the less general interest there is in the story. Some places are black holes, like West Papua," he says.

"It's definitely a story where we ask ourselves if we're neglecting a big problem on our doorstep. However, it's a big old world for a little old country to cover."

Deputy head of news Steve Rowe admits TVNZ probably should have shown more interest in the conference, but says the issue is complicated.

"Our reporter was declined a visa for West Papua by Indonesian authorities, and it gets expensive to go over," he says.

Leadbeater says there would be more pressure on the New Zealand Government to take action in West Papua if the media did its job.

Like Rev Yoman, Leadbeater would like to see New Zealand take initiative in playing the role of mediator in West Papua.

But the Government is reluctant to be involved. Foreign Affairs Minister Winston Peters refused to meet Rev Yoman at the conference.

Professor Vijay Naidu, director of development studies at Victoria University, believes the media is aware of the situation in West Papua, but hopes the problem will go away.

"But West Papua is not just going to go away. Generally, genuine indigenous people's - Fourth World - struggles are not given attention," he says.

"The issues of social justice and self determination in West Papua are too thorny and embarrassing for the mainstream media to cover."

However, this is not the case for all media. Radio New Zealand International broadcast more than 250 stories about West Papua in the last four years.

RNZI broadcasts stories to Pacific nations concerning Pacific issues.

Zweifel says the human abuses in West Papua are too severe to ignore.

He says the main newspapers and television news cover stories that are "sexy" in order to secure advertising revenue.

"It's also a case of news editors knowing nothing about West Papua, or not caring about the issue," says Zweifel.

"It's a place that is exploited for its gold, diamonds, gas and oil."

Ben Bohane is a Vanuatu-based Australian freelance photojournalist specialising in Melanesian conflict. He says the media neglect the issue of West Papua while other issues such as the Middle East "hijack our news agenda".

"Both Sydney University and the Yale School of Law in the US have labelled Indonesian policy in West Papua as 'genocide'."

"That makes Australia and New Zealand accessories to genocide if we sit and do nothing," he says.

Triangle Television is another alternative media outlet that aired a brief segment about the West Papua conference on the weekly *Darpan - Local News* show.

Its creator Syed Akbar Kamal says: "I chose to cover the West Papua conference from a humanistic angle. There is a lot of suffering there and it has been going on for such a long time."

Naidu says a reason for the lack of media and government attention is because the Indonesian Government is supported by the United States, Australia and "by extension" New Zealand.

Leadbeater agrees, saying although New Zealand broke off military ties with Indonesia, she "wouldn't rest easy with that".

"The Government is always cautious about offending Indonesia," she says.

West Papua made headlines in the Australian media earlier this year when 43 Papuan asylum seekers arrived in Queensland by boat.

Joe Collins, an Australian West Papua human rights campaigner for more than 20 years, says the images of asylum seekers on an outrigger boat generated public sympathy.

He says the photographs featured daily in many of the country's major newspapers.

John Wing, a speaker at the conference and coordinator of the West Papua project at the University of Sydney's Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, says media reporting of West Papua has now taken a different turn.

"Some commentators are undermining human abuses and formulating opinions based on their own standpoint. Very few of them know Papuans or have been to West Papua, so I urge them to go there."

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