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AUSTRALIA, INDONESIA & THE FUTURE OF WEST PAPUA

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INDONESIA'S ongoing visa row with Australia is not about the former East Timor -- but it could be. Jakarta sees all the signs of history repeating itself. And so, it must act now to fully engage with its easternmost province of West Papua or risk an international outcry in the future.

Under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's leadership, Indonesia and Australia have enjoyed neighbourliness -- that is, until Australia recently decided to grant asylum to 42 West Papuans who made it to its northern coast on an outrigger canoe after five days at sea in January.

The Papuan boat people, independence activists among them, accused the Indonesian military of genocide. Jakarta saw them as "economic migrants". President Yudhoyono weighed in and, to his counterpart Prime Minister John Howard staked his personal reputation on the safety of the refugees if they were returned home.

Faced with the difficult issue, Australia's immigration minister Amanda Vanstone examined the information by the individuals and third parties. The minister also considered Australian law and its international legal obligations before finally approving the three-year temporary protection visa on March 23 for the Papuan boat people. Australia may have settled for what was lawful and proper, but the outcome was diplomatically imperfect. A face-saving, humane and permanent way out for all parties could not be found.

Jakarta was again stunned and disappointed by Canberra's decision which the Indonesians believe ran counter to a spirit of cooperation and respect for territorial integrity. The move has strained relations and some analysts have described the rift as the worst since East Timor. Jakarta's reactions to the legal dispute have been limitless and the hyperbole seems fitting.

Dr Yudhoyono has lashed out Canberra's move to grant asylum, threatening to review bilateral cooperation without jeopardizing dialogue. It was classic Yudhoyono ambivalence. Indonesia's ambassador to Australia, Hamzah Thayeb, was recalled and told to leave "as soon as there's a flight that can take our ambassador home." Mr Hamzah returned a day after Canberra's announcement.

Parliamentarians called for a break in diplomatic ties and a boycott of a memorial service for 9 Australians killed on a rescue mission in last year's Nias disaster. Indonesia's media got in on the act. A trashy cartoon of Prime Minister Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in one popular tabloid looked as petty as Vice President Jusuf Kalla's knee-jerk

rejection of Australian aid to combat bird flu. A proposed security treaty with Australia and a prisoner transfer deal now hang in the balance.

Jayapura clash

Coincidentally, Australia's asylum recognition came in the wake of a deadly clash in the West Papuan capital of Jayapura. Five Indonesian security officials died when a student protest against the US-owned Freeport gold mine turned bloody a week before the visa stamp. The Cendrawasih University students were agitated but Jakarta alleged the incident was aggravated by copycats who were banking on an East Timor-style independence campaign. Why else did the protestors provoke the police to crackdown on them so forcefully?

Defence officials did not say who the copycats were but they had previously speculated those international NGOs, Australian aid and Christian groups with clout in European parliaments and the U.S. Congress have an ever-present and invisible hand in West Papuan unrest.

As conspiracy theories go, it is catchy but Indonesia's fears of another East Timor are understandable. It is a condition Prime Minister Howard discerns: "I understand why the Indonesians have reacted (to the asylum issue); we do not support for a moment the West Papuan independence claim. To those who are urging us to do so, I say we will not." Mr. Howard is only too aware his volte-face on East Timor six years ago had redefined Australia-Indonesia relations for a lifetime.

Still, it is up to Indonesia to prevent another separatist spectre. West Papua may lack a charismatic Xanana Gusmao and their rebel leader Theys Eluay was murdered in 2002. But the West Papuans, like the East Timorese, have other things going for them: a sympathetic international media; Christian lobby groups; a Pacific Melanesian descent. They are rich in resources and it is not unthinkable to think of a wealth grab in the new world of active political intervention.

Indonesia's ground troops and militias are far away from Jakarta and adventure-prone. The slightest military miscalculation in West Papua could trigger a tide of western and international pressure that could complicate the government's efforts to seek a lasting political solution there. In addition, Indonesia's sovereignty over West Papua is controversial despite the 1969 UN-sponsored plebiscite. Jakarta cannot afford to be complacent.

Indonesia's options

What can Indonesia do? A measured national reaction to regular waves of boat people will help the well-meaning central government get regional and international support to stem the flow. People smuggling and queue-jumping are increasingly testing Australia's immigration system and finite welcome.

Indonesia's growing cooperation with Australia on a variety of trans-national issues from drugs to illegal fishing will proceed despite domestic opposition. The Indonesian government may play to the populist and nationalist gallery at home, but it has to guard against a groundswell of anger by NGOs abroad and the Australian public against Indonesia and its Papuan policies.

Of concern is the military. The Yudhoyono government was swift to quell the Papuan student

uprising. An all-star security and ministerial team was dispatched to Jayapura twice in 10 days. Some analysts want an independent fact-finding team to investigate the riot. The bigger challenge is to ensure that ground troops, indigenous or non-native, march in step with the government's reformist plans to tackle multiple grievances there, such as, military kickbacks from Freeport.

The experience in the former East Timor has shown that the ethnic Timorese in the national police and military were just as reviled by the people. The official preoccupation with the make-up of the police and military in the separatist province and a sweeping media ban and news black-out is off-target. The defence policy is better served by grooming police and military commanders to have English language and cultural skills, media and human rights training.

Jakarta's on-again-off-again development policy for eastern Indonesia may also need to be relooked. The 2001 special autonomy package is meaningless without dialogue with the Papuan People's Council which International Crisis Group observes suffers from government neglect.

The peace process in Aceh is underway and peace in Papua is Jakarta's next unique challenge. Indonesian leaders' Christmas visits to Papua alone will not produce miracles. An ad-hoc Papua policy that occurs in fits and starts now needs to be concerted and comprehensive. The Yudhoyono government insists it is sincere about solving the Papuan problem; a real difference to the flickering morning star happens when the elements come together.

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