

DAVID ROBIE is editor of *Pacific Journalism Review*.

# West Papua's highway of blood and betrayal

*The Road: Uprising in West Papua*, by John Martinkus. Carlton, Vic: Black Books Inc. 2020. 114 pages. 978-1-760-64242-6

THE RUGGED mountainous highlands of New Guinea stretch from the Owen Stanley range in the east of the independent state of Papua New Guinea through the Star mountains straddling the border with Indonesian-ruled West Papua westwards through the perpetually snow-capped Puncak Jaya, at 4884m the island's highest peak.

Papua New Guinea is fairly unique in the world in that its capital, Port Moresby, is separated from the highlands in the absence of a highway from the south. On the western side of the border, however, it has been the dream of the Indonesian colonialists for five decades to one day 'tame' the highlands with a militarised road.

That dream is rapidly coming to fruition, but at a savagely high cost.

The 4300-km Trans-Papua Highway costing some US\$1.4 billion was supposed to bring 'wealth, development and prosperity' to the isolated regions of West Papua. At least, that's



how the planners and politicians envisaged the highway tucked safely far away in their air-conditioned Jakarta offices.

President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo is so enthusiastic about the project as a cornerstone for his national infrastructure strategies that he had publicity photographs taken of him on his Kawasaki trail motorbike on the highway (Robie, 2017). However, that isn't how West Papuans see 'The Road'.

In reality, writes Australian journalist John Martinkus in his latest book *The Road: Uprising in West Papua*, the highway brings military occupation by Indonesian troops, exploitation by foreign companies, environmental destruction and colonisation by Indonesian transmigrants.

The road would bring the death of their centuries-old way of life, previously undisturbed aside from the occasional Indonesian military incursion and the mostly welcome arrival of Christian missionaries. It was inevitable, really, that the plan by the Indonesian state to develop the isolated interior of the West Papua and Papua provinces would meet resistance. (p. 43)

The Nduga area in the rugged and isolated mountains north of Timika, near the giant Freeport copper and gold mine, has traditionally been a stronghold of pro-independence supporters. For centuries the Dani and Nduga tribespeople had fought ritualistic battles against each other—and outsiders. That is, until the Indonesians brought troops and military aircraft to the highlands that ‘did not play by these rules’.

On 1 December 2018, a ceremony marking the declaration of independence from the Dutch in 1961 by raising the *Morning Star* flag of a free Papua—as Papuans do every year—ended in bloodshed. Usually the flag waving—illegal as far the Indonesian authorities are concerned—goes unnoticed. But the highway has now come to this remote village.

Indonesians took photos on their cellphones of the flag raising and this sparked the kidnapping of 19 road construction workers and a soldier (although pro-independence sources argue that many of the workers are in fact soldiers) and they were shot dead.

The Indonesian military have carried out reprisal raids in the 18 months since then, forcing some 45,000 people

to flee their villages and become internal refugees. Two thousand soldiers, helicopters and 650 commandos are involved in security operations and protecting the highway. ‘It is the helicopters that are the worst. They are used as platforms to shoot or drop white phosphorous grenades or bomb-lets that inflict horrible injuries on the populace,’ writes Martinkus.

The Trans-Papua Highway would realise the boast of the founding Indonesian President Sukarno for a unified nation—‘From Sabang to Merauke’, is what he would chant to cheering rallies. Sabang is in Aceh in the west of the republic and Merauke is in the south-east corner of Papua, just 60 km from the Papua New Guinean border.

The Indonesian generals, not wanting anything to interfere with their highway exploitation plans, have vowed to ‘crush’ the resistance. However, the contemporary Papuan rebels are better armed, better organised and more determined than the earlier rebellion that followed the United Nations mandated, but flawed, ‘Act of Free Choice’ in 1969 when 1026 handpicked men and women voted under duress to become part of Indonesia.

Martinkus, a four-time Walkley Award-nominated investigative journalist specialising in Asia and the Middle East, has travelled to both ends of this highway. He reported in the early 2000s from West Papua until the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan became his major beats. One of his earlier books, *A Dirty Little War*, exposed the hidden side to the Timor-Leste struggle for independence.

*The Road* traverses the winding down of Dutch rule, early history of Indonesian colonialism in West Papua, the environmental and social devastation caused by the Grasberg mine, the petition to the United Nations, the Nduga crisis, the historic tabling of a 40 kg petition—1.8 million signatures—by the United Liberation Movement for West Papua calling for a referendum on independence, the so-called 2019 ‘monkey’ uprising that began as a student clash in the Java city of Surabaya and led to rioting across Papua, and now the coronavirus outbreak.

Martinkus pays tribute to the handful of earlier journalists who have risked much to tell the story that Australian and New Zealand diplomats do not want to hear and which has been denied by Indonesian authorities. An ABC *Foreign Correspondent* programme, including West Papuan journalist Victor Mambor in the crew, in mid-May 2020 was one of the rare exceptions (see review by Nicole Gooch).

Amnesty International has estimated that more than 100,000 Papuans have died since the Indonesian takeover. Four Australian-based researchers have embarked on a new project to map the violence in West Papua. Notes Martinkus:

Eventually, in the 1980s and the 90s, writers such as George Monbiot ventured into the areas cleared out by the Indonesians [for palm oil plantations and timber]. Robin Osborne also produced a landmark account of that time. Filmmaker Mark Worth, photojournalist Ben Bohane and ABC-then-SBS reporter

Mark Davis continued to try to cover events in West Papua. Lindsay Murdoch of Fairfax provided excellent coverage of the massacre on the island of Biak, off the north coast of Papua. (p. 23)

As in Timor-Leste, Martinkus recalls, the fall of the Suharto regime in May 1998 provided a ‘period of confusion among the military commanders on the ground’.

‘They didn’t know if they could expel, arrest or kill journalists as they had in the past,’ explains Martinkus, ‘and it created an environment where it was finally possible for reporters to get to previously inaccessible places and speak to people. The turmoil in Jakarta had created a kind of stasis among the military commanders in the far-flung provinces.’

Nevertheless, the Indonesian military watched and waited—and noted and recorded who the Papuan dissenters were; who to arrest and kill when political conditions became more helpful.

A notorious example is the case of the so-called Jakarta Six, Indonesian People’s Front for West Papua (FRI-West Papua) spokesperson Surya Anta and students Charles Kossay, Deno Tabuni, Isay Wenda, Ambrosius Mulait and Arina Elopere, who were convicted of ‘collective act of treason’—flag-waving and speeches—during the West Papua Uprising in August 2019. It was a virtual verdict due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All the activists were handed a nine-month prison sentence, except for Isay who was punished with eight months’ imprisonment.

Why has it been so difficult to tell the Papuan story—to get past the media



**Figure 1: The Jakarta Six: Surya Anta (centre) is the first non-Papuan Indonesian convicted for an independence protest.**

gatekeepers? There are several reasons, according to Martinkus. First, the daily oppression that West Papuan people face—and have faced for half a century—has been of little interest to news editors.

‘But it [is] that daily fear, and the casual violence and intimidation, that [is] the story,’ argues Martinkus. ‘For Papuans it [has] become a way of life: constant intimidation and violence and extortion by the Indonesian military, punctuated by short, sharp moments of protest and resistance, followed by the inevitable crackdown.’

Martinkus recalls in his typically compelling storytelling style his experience of when reporting in East Timor, ‘in order to get a story run you had to have more than 10 dead; the daily grind of one shot there, one beating there, one arrest there, never made it into the press.

I’ll never forget the cynical words delivered down the phone by one Australian editor after I had watched a

man—a boy, really—shot dead in front of my eyes as I cowered in a ditch to avoid Indonesian gunfire in East Timor. ‘So what are your plucky brown fellows up to today?’ he said. (p. 24)

He didn’t run the story.

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