

Sandline's mercenaries helped Kopassus

Mercenaries expelled from Papua New Guinea in 1997 had worked a year earlier in West Papua assisting Indonesia's notorious Kopassus special forces troops in an operation that caused many civilian deaths.

By PETER CRONAU

THE SOUTH AFRICAN mercenary group, Executive Outcomes, provided both training and operational advice to the Indonesian special forces Kopassus in a hostage rescue operation in West Papua (Irian Jaya) in 1996, the former chief executive officer has revealed. Nick van den Bergh informed me that he led a team of five "military advisers" who travelled to Indonesia to provide training in "special techniques" to Kopassus special forces troops. Van den Bergh says he reported directly to the Kopassus head, now-disgraced Indonesian Major-General Prabowo Subianto.

The five Executive Outcomes "consultants" also advised Prabowo's Kopassus troops on operational aspects of the execution of the May 1996 rescue operation. This assistance took place "in field" at an advance military base at Keneyam in West Papua.

In 1997, it was Van den Bergh who led the Executive Outcomes military team into Papua New Guinea, as sub-contractors under the prime contract of Tim Spicer's Sandline International. This operation was to capture the Panguna gold mine operated by British/Australian mining giant Rio Tinto. The massive copper and gold mine in the Papua New Guinea island territory of Bougainville had been closed by the independence-minded Bougainville Revolutionary Army in 1989.

In West Papua in January 1996, guerilla soldiers of the OPM (Free Papua Movement), led by Kelly Kwalik, had kidnapped British, Dutch, German and

PETER CRONAU

Indonesian hostages to attract international publicity to their independence campaign. The kidnapping occurred in the highlands of West Papua where indigenous communities have been disrupted by the huge Freeport McMoRan copper and gold mine which is partly owned by Rio Tinto, the owner of the Bougainville mine.

The Kopassus troops, trained and advised by Executive Outcomes, were responsible for a deadly helicopter assault on the West Papuan village of Geselema on May 9, 1996, in which many civilians were murdered and numerous others wounded. This was the start of an Indonesian retribution campaign aimed at capturing the OPM responsible and punishing the local civilian population. These actions over several months reportedly led to the deaths of hundreds of West Papuans displaced from their lands by the military operation.

One of the helicopters involved in the attack on Geselema was seen carrying Red Cross markings while carrying Kopassus troops and a number of white soldiers. This long rumoured presence of "white soldiers" on a white helicopter was confirmed in Mark Davis's *Four Corners* programme on ABC TV first shown on 12 July 1999 in Australia. [See "*Blood on the Cross*", pp 10-32]

The widespread international outcry following the airing of the programme has resulted in the International Red Cross undertaking to look into the revelation. The hostages were freed a week after the Geselema attack when Indonesian regular soldiers stumbled into the hostage groups during an attack on the suspected hideout. Two hostages, both Indonesians, died in the operation, apparently at the hands of relatives of the villagers murdered in Geselema.

A report on the events, released in June 1999 by the Robert F Kennedy Center for Human Rights, details many cases of human rights abuses that followed the campaign. An NGO report released in late July 1999 in the West Papuan capital Jayapura also detailed eye-witness accounts of murderous attacks on Geselema and other villages.

There were other military elements present in West Papua for the planning and conducting of the operation in addition to the Executive Outcomes mercenary "advisers". They included the British Defence Attache from Jakarta, ex-SAS Colonel Ivar Helberg, a three member team from the Hostage Negotiation Unit of New Scotland Yard, several personnel believed to be from the British SAS (Special Air Service), and representatives of the Dutch military forces. The operation used Israeli surveillance equipment supplied by the Singaporean Government.

MERCENARIES HELPED KOPASSUS

The Kopassus special forces involved in the attacks had received specialised training in Australia from Australian SAS special forces. The training was ostensibly anti-terrorism training but the helicopter assault techniques and weapons practice provided are dual-use and very suitable for counter-insurgency operations as used against the indigenous West Papuans.

Kopassus's General Prabowo later visited the SAS headquarters in Swanbourne, Perth, to provide a confidential briefing on the planning and conduct of the operation to the SAS troops.

The West Papuans have been fighting for their independence since 1969 when the UN handed the territory over to Indonesia following a sham vote by selected and intimidated local representatives. In the early 1960s, the Dutch colonial administration of Dutch West New Guinea had set up a Legislative Council, and adopted a flag and anthem, on the path to planned independence for the territory. This was cut short by an Indonesian military campaign led by Major Suharto who was to later to become president.

Since the fall of President Suharto in 1998 following widespread public protest after the Indonesian economic collapse, there has been a resurgence of West Papuan nationalism.

The company Executive Outcomes has provided mercenaries for security operations in several African nations often in return for a share in the mineral resources secured. Van den Bergh declined to reveal who was paying for the Executive Outcomes training and advice as he wished to preserve the identity of his client, but he added he was satisfied with the operation and had been paid for his services in cash.

The company Executive Outcomes closed down in 1998, but some of its principals are understood now to be engaged in providing security services to resource projects in several African countries.

The coming to light of the involvement of Executive Outcomes mercenaries in Indonesia is another chapter in the record of the inglorious support given by Western governments to the notorious Kopassus troops of Indonesia.

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