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Indonesian ties strong enough to stand straight talk on Papua

MARC PURCELL

Relations between Australia and Indonesia are the strongest they have ever been, from intercepting people smugglers to mapping Indonesia's forests to take advantage of future carbon offset markets and the cash bonanza they may bring.

Despite this friendship, it is a safe bet that Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono will not address the running sore of human rights and development in the resource-rich provinces of Papua and West Papua when he addresses the Australian Parliament today, nor will Prime Minister Kevin Rudd raise it in response.

The two provinces were created in 2001 from Irian Jaya, out of what most Australians think of as West Papua. Together, they have the largest budget revenue of any provinces in Indonesia but the greatest levels of poverty. Both are part of Indonesia following a flawed United Nations referendum in 1969, but human rights violations continue along with calls for dialogue between the government and indigenous Melanesian groups.

In 2006, a jittery Howard government crafted a treaty to reassure the Indonesian government that neither country would support activities that constituted a threat to the stability of the other country.

Fears were that Australian public sympathy for the plight of the people of West Papua would grow into another groundswell of support for Papuan independence, similar to that of East Timor. Before the ink was even dry on the treaty, the assurance was tested by the arrival of 43 West Papuan asylum seekers who were found to be refugees.

In James Cameron's movie *Avatar*, a Machiavellian foreign mining company employs an outside military force to suppress the feisty indigenous people, whose ancestral land the company exploits for valuable minerals. The script could have been inspired by the giant US mining company Freeport McMoran's Grasberg mine in Papua, and its backing by the Indonesian army and police to suppress local protest.

Grasberg is the third-largest copper and gold mine in the world and is a 40 per cent joint venture with the Australian-listed mining giant Rio Tinto. In January, unidentified gunmen shot at two buses carrying mine employees. It was the latest in a series of armed attacks on vehicles and protests against the mine, and followed the killing in December by the Indonesian army of Kelly Kwalik, who led a militant wing of the Free Papua Movement (OPM) and had campaigned against the presence of Freeport.

In April last year, police opened fire using live ammunition and rubber bullets on demonstrators calling for a boycott of elections in protest against human rights violations in Nabire, Papua. At least seven people were injured, including a 10-year-old boy who was shot as he returned home from school.

Religious affiliation is a flashpoint in some towns, too. The influx of Muslim migrants from other parts of Indonesia has raised fears among some Christian Papuans about cultural domination by non-Papuans and "Islamisation".

Despite these deep-seated problems, the provinces are not colonies of Jakarta. Indigenous governors, directly elected by the populace, lead Papua and West Papua. Under Jakarta's 2001 decentralisation laws, and a stalled Autonomy Act, the two provincial governments' powers have increased.

Since 2001, Papua's revenues have increased five-fold (in real terms), according to the World Bank, and overall revenues are expected to double by 2020. Since 2002, the World Bank estimates poverty has declined from 46 to 37 per cent.

However, Papua and West Papua remain Indonesia's poorest regions and Australia could do much more to help. It could profitably draw on its extensive experience in assisting Indonesia with the rebuilding of the province of Aceh, ravaged by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami and a 30-year separatist war.

Rudd could be offering to improve the quality of education for Papuan children, help the provincial governments deliver better services, help community members, including women, to participate in decision-making and democratic processes, and help ensure resource revenues are distributed more equitably.

If economic development does not benefit the poorest, protests and reactive official violence will spread. In the face of this, Australia maintaining a safe diplomatic silence will be neither justified nor sustainable.

Rudd could do no better with Yudhoyono than start with the ALP's Indonesia policy.

This calls for a dialogue that "will give expression to the Australian people's fundamental concern with human rights and democratic freedoms. Labor strongly supports the full implementation of the Special Autonomy Act of 2001 for West Papua".

Some observers in both countries have clumsily claimed that raising human rights equates to supporting West Papuan secession. But the first priority of the Indonesian state should be to promote dialogue about human rights and development with its West Papuan citizens.

Rudd and Yudhoyono should start some straight talk about West Papua now.

Marc Purcell is the executive director of the Australian Council for International Development, the peak body for Australian aid agencies.