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IPAC Short Briefing No.2: COVID-19 AND CONFLICT IN PAPUA

I. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic is exacerbating tensions in Indonesia's Papua province and exposing the shortcomings of government policy there. The Jokowi government urgently needs a senior official to focus exclusively on Papua to ensure that immediate humanitarian needs as well as longer-term security issues are more effectively addressed.

The virus arrived in Papua as tensions left over from deadly communal violence in August-September 2019 remained high, and pro-independence guerrillas from the Free Papua Organisation (Organisasi Papua Merdeka, OPM) were intensifying attacks in the central highlands. Papua's major fault-lines – indigenous vs migrant, central control vs local autonomy, independence movement vs the state – affected both how Papuans interpreted the pandemic and the central government's response. They also added new complications to the already formidable obstacles to addressing the virus in Indonesia's most remote province.

Many Papuans already are portraying the virus as being brought in by non-Papuan migrants and the military, adding to accumulated hostility and suspicion toward both. Papua is supposed to enjoy "special autonomy" but Jakarta's attempt to overrule a provincial ban on travel into the province in the wake of the virus showed the limitations of that status. It also convinced many Papuans that the central government had little concern for their welfare.

All this was taking place as the OPM was stepping up its low-intensity conflict with the Indonesian state in the area around the giant Freeport mine. Thousands of additional security forces sent to Papua in 2018 and 2019 have not made any visible dent in OPM's activities or provided effective protection for the Freeport mine that has become the OPM's main target.

It may be that the government is underestimating the security threat from the guerrillas, whom it has traditionally seen as less dangerous than the non-armed political movement for independence and its foreign supporters. There is certainly no acknowledgment that the OPM appears to have grown stronger during the Jokowi's government's tenure.

The OPM attacks and the added police and military presence have produced more displacement in poor conditions, creating new vulnerabilities to contagion in a province that already has the country's highest poverty, worst health care and most poorly educated populace. The reported Covid-19 cases are now

concentrated in Papua's major cities, but when the virus hits remote areas of the highlands and spreads like wildfire, few will ever know its true impact.

Overall, the Covid-19 crisis has reinforced a sense of victimisation among Papuans that will only fuel more distrust.

II. THE DEBATE OVER LOCKDOWNS

Across Indonesia, Covid-19 has produced battles between the central government and local officials, notably in the capital, Jakarta, over who has the authority to declare lockdowns and how far those lockdowns can go. In Papua, however, the dispute between Gov. Lukas Enembe and Jakarta officials that arose in mid-March 2020 instantly took on additional political connotations, especially as the governor has long been seen as sympathetic to independence.¹

The Jokowi government dithered throughout February and early March on how to address the pandemic. As late as 15 March, the president was only urging people to “work at home, study at home, pray at home” without actually requiring that they do so.² Mid-March was already far too late to prevent the virus from spreading, but Gov. Enembe at least began to act. On 17 March he issued an “emergency alert” (*siaga darurat*), effective immediately through 17 April. Should the number of cases increase, he said, he would consider raising the alert to a higher level (which he did on 8 April).

On 24 March, the provincial government met with district (*kabupaten*) heads, mayors and religious leaders and issued a “joint agreement” (*kesepakatan bersama*) that included the following points:

- All residents of Papua, “both Indonesian and foreign”, should practice social distancing, stay at home to the extent possible and not attend non-essential gatherings;
- Each *kabupaten* and municipality would set up a Covid-19 taskforce;
- Health officials would conduct the 3Ts (trace, test and treat) in infected areas;
- All foreigners would be stopped from entering Papua via air, land and sea;
- All air and sea passenger service would be stopped, though incoming cargo and medical supplies would be guaranteed;
- Provincial and *kabupaten* authorities would ensure protective equipment and additional incentives to medical and paramedical personnel dealing with the virus;
- Daily activities to secure basic needs would be allowed between 6 am and 2 pm, with markets for women traders open from 4 to 8 pm;
- The Covid-19 taskforces would have a law and security team to take strict disciplinary measures toward the public to ensure that the government's exhortations were obeyed;
- All movement of people to and from the central highland areas of La Pago, Mee Pago and Anim Ha should stop.³

¹ For an excellent analysis of the politics of Covid-19 in Papua, see Vidhyandika D. Perkasa, “Menangani COVID-19 di Papua”, CSIS Commentaries DMRU-016, 27 March 2020.

² “Jokowi Instruksikan Bekerja dari Rumah, ini Arti Work From Home,” kompas.com, 16 March 2020.

³ These are three of the seven traditional cultural areas of Papua. La Pago includes the *kabupaten* of Jayawijaya, Pegunungan Bintang, Lanny Jaya, Tolikara, Nduga, Puncak Jaya, Yalimo, Yahukimo, Membramo Tengah and Puncak – it is Governor Lukas Enembe's stronghold. Mee Pago covers the *kabupaten* of Dogiyai, Deiyai, Nabire, Intan Jaya, Paniai and Mimika, while Anim Ha covers the southern *kabupaten* of Merauke, Boven Digoel, Asmat

- Religious activities involving mass gatherings would be restricted.
- The entire policy would be reviewed on 9 April and stricter measures put in place if the number of cases should rise.⁴

On 25 March, the provincial government announced that no passengers would be allowed to enter Papua on ships or planes. The clear fear was that outsiders would carry the virus to Papua – and “outsiders” was understood not only in the sense of non-Papuans but also other Papuans, such as coastal residents, coming into the highlands and vice-versa. An announcement went out from the Merauke office of the Transport Ministry that all airports in Papua would be closed to passenger traffic between 26 March and 9 April, except for medical personnel and emergency cases.⁵ Sentani airport, serving Papua’s capital, Jayapura, normally handles 33 passenger flights a day, so the potential impact was huge.

Officials of the Jokowi government reacted to Gov Enembe as they did later to Gov Anies Baswedan in Jakarta. From the president on down, they said deciding on lockdowns was not the prerogative of local governments, it was theirs. The next day, the Transport Ministry in Jakarta cancelled the directive, but local authorities resisted and the airports remain closed to passengers. (On 7 April, the ban was extended for two weeks, except in Timika, where the *bupati* decided on 6 April to open the airport to all Garuda flights, including passengers.) Jakarta’s rejection of the lockdown infuriated Papuans who in many areas decided to take matters into their own hands, dragging logs across roads to prevent access by outsiders.

On 26 March 2020, PT Pelni, the national shipping company, announced that its ships would no longer be transporting passengers to or from Sorong, Manokwari, Biak, Serui, Kaimana, Fak-Fak, Namlea or Jayapura. (This was later extended to all ports in Papua and West Papua and southeastern Maluku.)⁶

The travel bans were popular with Papuans from local officials to civil society to the OPM. The *bupati* of Mamberamo Tengah said in a widely-disseminated video that in rejecting them, senior officials in Jakarta were suggesting that Papuan lives did not matter.⁷ A coalition of NGOs called Solidaritas Organisasi Sipil (SOS) Untuk Tanah Papua issued a statement supporting the governor and castigating attempts to overrule him.⁸

and Mappi.

⁴ Government of Papua Province, Kesepakatan Bersama Nomor:440/3612/SET tentang Pencegahan, Pengendalian dan Pananggulangan Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) di Propinsi Papua, 24 March 2020.

⁵ Letter No. AU.201/301/0014/KOBU WIL.X/III/2020 from Kantor Otoritas Bandar Udara Wilayah X, Direktorat Jendral Perhubungan Udara, Kementerian Perhubungan, 25 March 2020.

⁶ While the ban was strongly endorsed by the provincial government, it led in some cases to weak coordination with kabupaten-level authorities. On 5 April 2020, the provincial government’s transport office stopped the KM Lestari, a ship carrying medical supplies, food packets and other needed supplies for Mamberamo Raya *kabupaten* on the grounds that it was illegally carrying a few passengers and had no authorisation from the governor. It was three hours out of Jayapura when it was ordered to return. The dispute was sorted out, but it revealed how the effort to set up Covid-19 task forces had created new layers of bureaucracy that complicated rather than facilitated relief efforts See “Bupati Dorinus Sesalkan Pembatalan Kapal Pengangkut Alkes ke Mamberamo” *Cenderawasih Pos*, 7 April 2020.

⁷ “Luhut Panjaitan Larang Pemda Lockdown, Bupati Mamteng: Jangan Bicara Sembarangan, Ini Rakyat Kami,” *wartakota.tribunews.com*, 1 April 2020.

⁸ See the 27 March 2020 press statement from SOS untuk Tanah Papua posted on the Walhi website, <https://walhi.or.id/solidaritas-organisasi-sipil-s-o-s-untuk-tanah-papua-penutupan-akses-masuk-ke-papua-merupakan-bagian-langsung-dari-perang-melawan-covid-19-di-papua>.

The usual voices in the pro-independence community, including the OPM, tried to promote conspiracy theories that Covid-19 was only the latest in a government plot to exterminate indigenous Papuans, but concern in the broader community about migrants carrying the virus was real.⁹

Local officials were worried about corona carriers coming in because they knew once it started, it would be virtually impossible to stop. Puncak Jaya, where Enembe had once been *bupati*, was the first *kabupaten* to declare a lockdown on 23 March. Jayawijaya, with its capital Wamena, was second, on 23 March. Wamena had been the site in September 2019 of deadly attacks on migrants, so authorities there were particularly concerned about any new trigger for anti-migrant sentiment, especially as the men accused of masterminding the violence were on trial as the virus struck, thereby providing regular reminders through the media of the 2019 events.¹⁰

When locals threatened to set up roadblocks themselves on 23 March if the local government did not impose a lockdown, ten extra platoons of military and police came in to guard the airport and set up security posts at various points around Wamena to prevent them.¹¹ A two-week lockdown was officially declared later the same day.

The result of the dispute over lockdowns was to reinforce the perception in Papua of the central government as patronising and arrogant and of Enembe as a defender of the people.

III. VIOLENCE AROUND FREEPORT

An escalation of violence around the Freeport mine was underway before the virus struck. Late 2019 and early 2020 saw a steady rise in guerrilla activity in the area where the *kabupaten* of Mimika, Lanny Jaya, Nduga and Puncak all meet. It is the centre of OPM activity and the site of intense competition among commanders for status. Close to this juncture of the four *kabupaten* is Tembagapura, home of the Freeport gold and copper mine, center of economic activity for the highlands and a company seen as the enemy by the OPM and many activists for its size, its wealth, its environmental impact and its association with the military, especially during the Soeharto era. The OPM appears to have taken a strategic decision around mid-2019 to step up its “war”, with the company as the main target. It is not clear where the

⁹ After *Tempo* newspaper published a report that Home Affairs Minister Tito Karnavian had told their reporter that he did not agree with a lockdown in Papua and that physical distancing should be sufficient (a report his office later denied), Socrates Yoman, a pro-independence minister, protested that opposing a lockdown would just be another way of murdering indigenous Papuans. See “Surat Protest Terbuka Kepada Menteri Dalam Negeri Indonesia”, 25 March 2020, widely disseminated on Papua social media. The OPM similarly said “Papuans cannot help but wonder if Jakarta is pursuing its genocidal policies by allowing the continuous flow of people from infected regions in Indonesia into West Papua.” See “OPM Chairman Statement and Appeal to the Indonesian Government and the International Community regarding the COVID-19 Crisis”, 8 April 2020.

¹⁰ Papua had been beset by protests since an incident in Surabaya in August 2019 in which Papuan students who refused to take part in Indonesia’s Independence Day celebrations were taunted with racist epithets by members of the security forces. News of the incident triggered angry protests among Papuan students elsewhere and then to more organized demonstrations led by the West Papuan National Committee (Komite Nasional Papua Barat, KNBP), including several that ended in violence. The Wamena riot broke out on 23 September 2019 after a message, almost certainly false, went out that a migrant schoolteacher had used a racist term in the classroom. This led to a violent protest in which more than 30 were killed, most of them migrants burned in arson attacks on their shops. Several Papuans were also killed by gunfire from security forces.

¹¹ “Isu massa tutup bandara Wamena, 10 peleton TNI/Polri disiagakan,” www.antaraneews.com, 23 March 2020.

strategy came from or what triggered it – though the timing suggests a link to the August-September 2019 violence in Wamena and other highland areas.

The OPM operates as a loose association of clan-based units. A supreme commander of the National Liberation Army for West Papua (Tentara Pembebasan Nasional-Papua Barat, TPNPB) in theory oversees a network of 33 regional commands (KODAPs) reporting to an operational commander, Lekagak Telenggen, an ethnic Dani from Puncak district.¹² A spokesperson, Sebby Sambom, sits on Papua New Guinea border issuing press statements and claiming responsibility (or not) for attacks. In practice, activity is concentrated in four or five of the highland KODAPs, and the various commanders frequently cross into each other's territory. The various units seem to have no difficulty acquiring arms or ammunition, sometimes from raids on military or police posts but frequently purchased from corrupt troops. There have been occasional dealings with gun mafias in Papua New Guinea and Maluku but most of the weapons are locally acquired.

The failure of security forces to anticipate or prevent the uptick in violence or to provide adequate protection for those living and working in the area suggests the need for an independent review of security policy in Papua, including how the thousands of police and military there are trained and utilised.

A. The OPM's Call to Arms and the Tembagapura Violence

It was Lekagak Telenggen who came to increasingly dominate OPM media coverage in 2019 with an effort to unite highland forces for an intensification of the “war”. In August 2019, he appeared in a propaganda video speaking in Indonesian and showing off bombs that he said Indonesia had obtained with American and Australian help, interspersed with a rant about Freeport.¹³ In January 2020, he appeared in a video message with about fifteen armed men, walking along an asphalt road in broad daylight in Puncak and clearly not worried about being stopped.¹⁴

On 13 January, gunmen shot at a Freeport convoy moving from Tembagapura toward Timika, though there were no casualties. Police said the nature of the operation pointed to the group of Jhoni Beanal alias Joni Botak, an ethnic Amungme OPM leader from the Mimika area. They said they could not pursue the perpetrators because the area was too steep.¹⁵

On 11 February, OPM headquarters reported that fighters from the KODAP in Pegunungan Bintang district led by Lamek Alipky Taplo had found the remains of a TNI helicopter that crashed on 28 June 2019 in subdistrict Oksop, near the Papua New Guinean border, killing all twelve on board. Lamek claimed his men had shot it down. A TNI spokesman insisted the crash was an accident, because there

¹² “Komando Jenderal OPM untuk Kobarkan Perang di Papua, gatra.com, 4 March 2020 and “Terungkap! Inilah daftar 17 nama jenderal OPM yang wajib dibasmi TNI-Polri”, minews.id, 15 August 2019. The information was based on a reporter's telephone interview with Sebby Sambom. The supreme commander is Goliath Tabuni in Puncak but he appears to be no longer active.

¹³ “General Operation Commander of TPNPB OPM Mayjen Lekagak Telenggen Explain Indonesian Troop Bombing [sic],” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6lrwgnuNeY>, 17 August 2019.

¹⁴ “Viral OPM Tampilkan Diri Bersenjata Lengkap Turun Gunung, Organisasi Papua Merdeka,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8iMyRSEatI>, 1 January 2020 (but video was recorded on 23 October 2019).

¹⁵ “Bus karyawan Freeport di tembak, diduga kuat pelakunya kelompok Joni Botak, berikut fakta-faktanya,” aceh.tribunnews.com, 14 January 2020.

had been no activity of the OPM around Pegunungan Bintang for the last 20 years.¹⁶ If that were true, it raises the question of how a new KODAP was able to suddenly materialize out of nowhere.

On 26 February, Lekagak Telenggen issued a general call to arms, ordering all KODAPs to act. On 3 March he said the TPNPB fighters would not stop until Papua was free and announced, “We, the commander and fighters from 33 KODAP are already in the area of the biggest goldmine in the world in Tembagapura, Papua”.¹⁷

On 4-5 March, multiple OPM groups entered four villages in Banti, Tembagapura, firing at police and military posts and setting up roadblocks to prevent access. Sebby Sambom said that fighters from different KODAP were “occupying” the villages: one area was under the control of Gusby Waker and Joni Botak; a second under Brigjen Peni Murib, Jumando Waker and Pius Magai from KODAP Ilaga; and a third was under Telenggen himself and Militer Murib, head of KODAP Sinak. He said a fourth area was under the command of Sabinus Waker, a commander who has operated in the Tembagapura area for years.¹⁸ The OPM attack led to more displacement with some 1,600 residents evacuated by the military and packed into poor facilities in Timika – ripe for contagion if the virus should strike.

By 13 March, police announced that the four villages had been secured, though one group was still operating around Kampung Opitawak. On 14 March, OPM fighters clashed with the TNI at Kali Bua, Tembagapura, and four were killed, one of them a woman.

Then on 30 March, a group of eight gunmen led an assault inside Freeport’s office complex in Kuala Kencana, killing an employee from New Zealand and seriously injuring two of his Indonesian colleagues. It was the first time the OPM had ever penetrated Kuala Kencana. The head of KODAP Timika, Hendrik Wamang, claimed responsibility. He said “Our operational orders are clear, that the battlefield is the area Freeport and Grasberg, up to Portsie. Kuala Kencana is part of the war zone, Timika is as well.”¹⁹

Then OPM headquarters issued a statement in English:

The attack of the Kwala Kencana Timika offices was led by Brigadier General Guspi Waker and Jhoni Botak under the General Operations Command of Let-Jen Lekagak Telenggen and the High Commander, General Goliath Tabuni, As such it is the highest authority within the hierarchy of responsibility for the Papuan struggle which has CLAIMED FULL RESPONSIBILITY [caps in original] for these actions, and they are in full conformity with the war declaration against the Indonesian state.²⁰

¹⁶ “Senjata Korban Heli Jatuh di Ppaua Tak dikuasai OPM,” tagar.id, 12 February 2020.

¹⁷ “Komando Jenderal OPM untuk Kobarkan Perang di Papua,” gatra.com, 4 March 2020.

¹⁸ “TBNB Kalim Kerahkan 33 Kodap ke Wilaya Tembagapura,” seputarpapua.com, 5 March 2020. The reference to Pegunungan Bintang was interesting because on 4 January 2020, the commander of that KODAP, Lamek Alipky Taplo, issued a press release that his fighters in late January had found the TNI helicopter that crashed on 28 June 2019 in distrik Oksop, near the Papua New Guinean border, killing all twelve on board. The fighters helped themselves to the weapons on board and said they were now the property of the KODAP. Lamek claimed that they had shot down the helicopter; the TNI had claimed the crash was an accident.

¹⁹ “TPNPB Akui Lakukan Pemenbakan di Kuala Kencana, suarapapua.com, 30 March 2020.

²⁰ The statement is reproduced in full in “Papua: Terrorist attack kills New Zealand miner,” *The Citizen Daily*, 2 April 2020.

The statement went on to say:

The war which aims at CLOSING DOWN Freeport is part of the war for the West Papuan National Liberation from the Indonesian colonizer, which will continue until Freeport has to CLOSE COMPLETELY and Indonesia and America sit down, without delay, with the OPM-TPNPB to NEGOTIATE on the basis of international law.²¹

Although some pro-independence diaspora groups warned supporters to be careful of claims that could be used to “delegitimize and criminalise” the independence movement, there was little doubt of the claim’s validity.²²

A theory arose among some Papua observers that the shooting at Kuala Kencana came about because ethnic Amungme leaders in the OPM, represented by Hendrik Wamang and Joni Botak, resented ethnic Dani incursions into their area and decided to show that they could pull off an even bigger action. There is indeed a long history of Amungme-Dani tensions, but IPAC has not seen any evidence for the theory that the 30 March shooting was an Amungme effort at oneupmanship. Joni Botak and his men were very much part of the joint Tembagapura assault, and the Kuala Kencana attack seems in line with Legakak Telenggen’s stated goals. The one jarring note is that the first claim of responsibility was issued by Wamang rather than Sebby Sambom, but this anomaly was quickly remedied with a supporting statement from OPM headquarters.

All this said, nothing in Papua is ever simple and there are always multiple parties and multiple interests involved, so a fuller picture will have to await a more thorough investigation. Meanwhile, violence continued: a clash between OPM fighters and a joint army-police patrol in Iwaka, Mimika on 10 April led to the arrest of a man police said had hosted the Kuala Kencana shooters the night before the attack.²³

B. Where was the security?

One question in all this was, where were the security forces? Thousands of Brimob and military units were in Papua, specifically sent to prevent violence. It is unlikely that any other area in Indonesia has seen so many task forces (satgas) deployed to so little effect. Why have they not been able to gather needed intelligence about pending attacks, capture guerrilla leaders or provide better protection? There are many possible answers: they could be inadequately trained or inadequately equipped to patrol very far off the main road; if so, these needs should be addressed by their commanders in Jakarta. They could be scared because of the number of police and military ambushed by the OPM, in which case their superiors need to look at recruitment and preparation. With three- and four-month rotations, their tours of duty could be too short for them to get motivated to do anything involving risk. It is an open secret that both TNI and police are involved in the illegal gold panning business in the tailings of the Freeport mine; this could take precedence over legitimate tasks.²⁴ But the incursion into Tembagapura had been building for months,

²¹ Ibid.

²² “ULMWP Minta Media Hati-hati Terkait Klaim Penembakan,” *Cenderawasih Pos*, 2 April 2020. United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) warned supporters to be wary of the claims because the TPNPB had never attacked civilians. There are many instances, however, where it has.

²³ “Warga yang Ditangkap Saat Baku Tembak KKB dan Aparat di Mimika Jadi Tersangka,” *detik.com*, 11 April 2020.

²⁴ Rent-seeking can also lead to competition between the TNI and police. On 12 April, two police were killed in a shoot-out with the TNI in Mamberambo Raya; the causes remained under investigation as this report was being

and the inability to predict or prevent it or the attack on Kuala Kencana suggests a need for rethink of how intelligence is gathered and how patrols are conducted. (In the August-September 2019 violence, there also appeared to be major intelligence failures and lack of preventive action by police.)

The number of security forces in Papua was high to begin with but there has been a steady expansion.

Satgas Nemangkawi, a Brimob unit, was set up after the December 2018 Nduga massacre in which nineteen construction workers were killed by an OPM unit led by Egianus Kogoya.²⁵ The massacre and subsequent military operations sparked the displacement of several hundred Papuans, many of whom later died of illness exacerbated by poor conditions. Egianus and his men continued to regularly ambush TNI patrols around Nduga's Kenyam airport with incidents in March, July and August 2019 and January and February 2020. The mandate for Satgas Nemangkawi was extended for another six months in January 2020, but the most recent extension was aimed at providing security for Indonesia's National Games, scheduled to take place in Papua from 20 October to 2 November 2020.

Satgas Amole is a Brimob unit created specifically to provide protection for Freeport as a "vital asset", with regular four-month rotations of 400 men. They were reportedly nowhere to be seen when the Kuala Kencana shooting took place.

Satgas Aman Nusa, set up to guard the border, has 100 police coming in on regular three-month rotations and has been deployed to help staff posts further inland, such as Nduga.

The army's elite Kopassus and Kostrad units are also deployed in the highland areas, with their men frequently the target of OPM ambushes. It is harder to get specific figures for TNI deployments to the highlands. Overall, however, the Jakarta-based NGO Imparsial estimates that in 2019 the TNI had a total of some 12,000 to 16,000 personnel operating across the two Papuan provinces, with some 8,000 to 10,000 of those from the army.²⁶

After the violence in August-September 2019, 6,000 additional police and military were deployed across Papua and Papua Barat. After the Tembagapura assault in early March 2020, Papuan police chief Paulus Waterpauw said that 3,000 military and police were in place there.²⁷ But their presence was reactive, not proactive. Despite the numbers, something clearly is not working, because the more troops that come in, the more emboldened the OPM seems to become.

IV. THE OPM AND COVID-19

As numbers of reported cases in Papua continued to rise, the OPM tried to exploit the situation for its own benefit. It issued a new statement on 8 April 2020, saying it fully supported the efforts of local officials to implement a lockdown "despite threats by Jakarta" and questioned why the Indonesian military continued

released. See "7 Fakta Bentrok Tembakan Polisi dan TNI di Papua, 3 Orang Tewas", suara.com, 12 April 2020.

²⁵ Egianus, then only 19, claimed the men were military, but even had those claims been true, which they were not, the manner in which the workers were executed violated basic principles of humanitarian law. Nevertheless, the killings catapulted Egianus, who had just been installed two months earlier as commander of KODAP III Ndugama, to prominence.

²⁶ Imparsial, *Peran Internal Militer*. Jakarta, 2020, p.138.

²⁷ "Kelakuan Bejat KKB Papua Ganggu Anak Gadis Warga, Kini 3000 Personel TNI-Polri Berjaga di Mimika," surabaya.tribune.news, 15 March 2020.

to send personnel and supplies from infected regions to Papua. It asked President Jokowi to immediately withdraw all security forces and non-organic troops, warning of “large-scale confrontations in the near future” if the demand was not met.²⁸

It said it was committed to several measures in light of the pandemic. It would not attack health facilities, would allow free movement of medical equipment and personnel, assist with medical treatment for Papuans, as well as with lockdown policies and assist in spreading accurate information about how to prevent and treat Covid-19.²⁹

It demanded the release of all West Papuan political prisoners, especially in light of poor conditions in Indonesian prisons. (Papuan prisons were indeed cause for concern, given poor conditions and lack of medical care, but independence supporters were unlikely to be among the first freed.)³⁰

It reiterated its longstanding offer to the Indonesian government to negotiate an end to the conflict in Papua with an international third-party mediator, a non-starter in Jakarta.³¹ Even were the government not totally preoccupied with the pandemic, it has little to gain from sitting down with the OPM.

The government does need to understand, however, that major corrections are needed in its Papua policies if it wants to halt the rise in pro-independence activities in the highlands.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The main impact of Covid-19 thus far has been to increase distrust between Papua and the central government in Jakarta at a time when cooperation is urgently needed. More than ever, the Jokowi government needs a single individual whose sole job is to set strategy on Papua. That person needs to have enough clout in the president’s inner circle to influence policy; enough legitimacy to work closely with Papuan community leaders and officials; enough experience working in Papua to understand local dynamics; and enough executive and budgetary authority to ensure that decisions are implemented.

In the short-term the central government needs to ensure that the handling of the pandemic in Papua does not worsen the various conflicts there. To this end, it needs to:

- Support the provincial government in its lockdown efforts, while ensuring unimpeded delivery of humanitarian supplies.
- Assist provincial and *kabupaten* governments in developing better procedures for documenting the spread of the virus.
- Ensure that every deployment of security forces on short-term rotations is thoroughly tested. before leaving for Papua and as importantly, prior to return, with effort to ensure that the

²⁸ “OPM Chairman Statement and Appeal to the Indonesian Government and the International Community regarding the COVID-19 Crisis”, OPM-TPNPB Victoria headquarters, 8 April 2020.

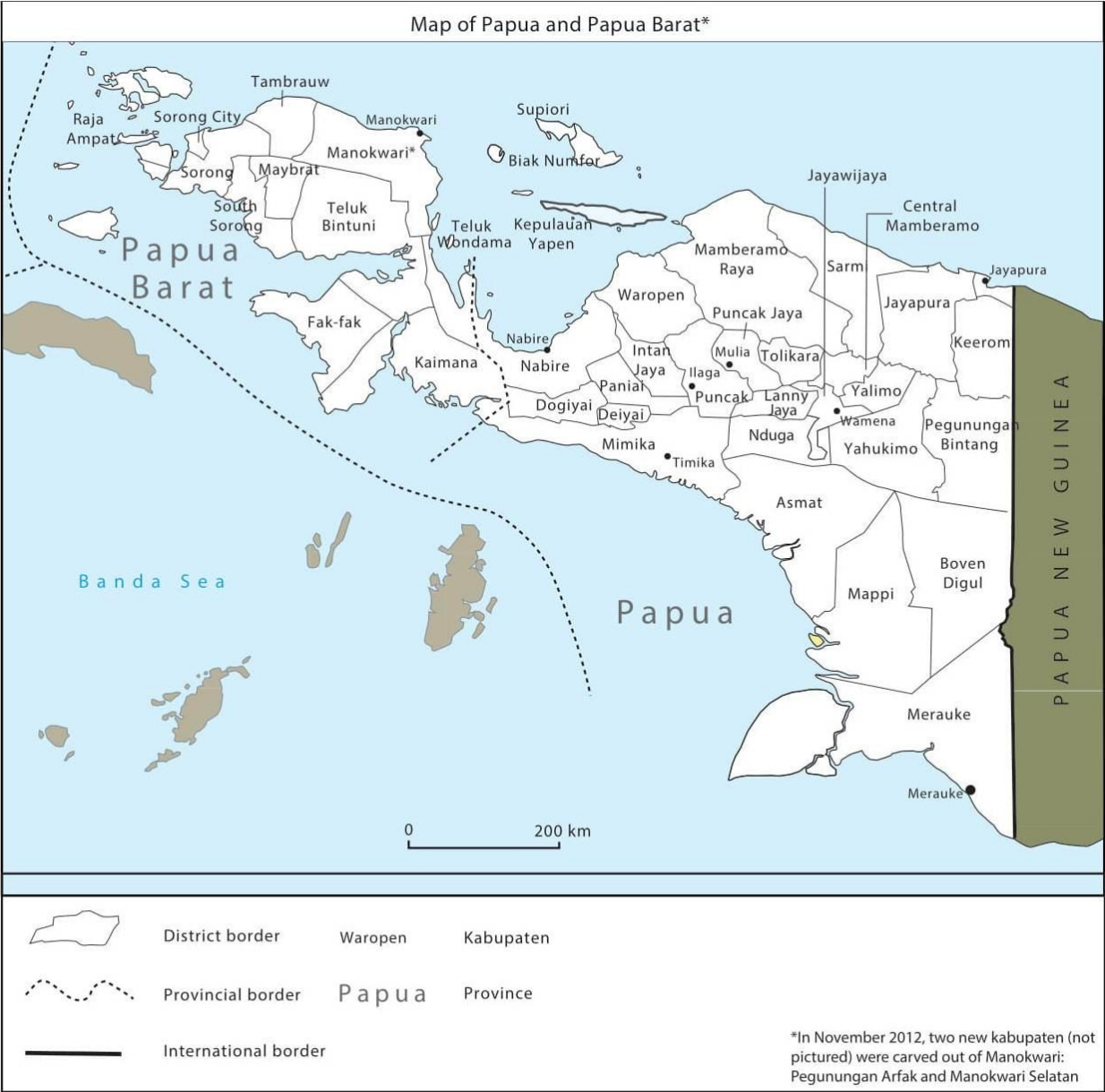
²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Dozens of offenders were released and conditions for visitors tightened in accordance with a directive from the Ministry of Law and Human Rights designed to ease overcrowding and reduce the risk of contagion in the country’s prisons more generally (Keputusan Menteri Hukum dan HAM RI No. 10 Tahun 2020 tentang Syarat Pemberian Asimilasi dan Hak Integrasi bagi Narapidana dan Anak Dalam Rangka Pencegahan dan Penanggulangan Penyebaran COVID-19).

³¹ “OPM Chairman Statement and Appeal to the Indonesian Government and the International Community regarding the COVID-19 Crisis”, OPM-TPNPB Victoria headquarters, 8 April 2020.

contacts of anyone found to be positive will be traced and tested. This would be a tall order anywhere in Indonesia and may be nearly impossible in Papua. Nevertheless, the need to ensure that security forces do not become a vector of transmission is critical.

- Urgently find ways to improve the conditions of the displaced, with the goal of trying to return them to their home communities as soon as possible.
- Ensure full transparency in covering the response to Covid-19, including equipment and medical personnel available, funds allocated and security forces deployed or reassigned. Any measures designed to limit journalists or whistle-blowers or curb criticism of public officials should be revoked.
- Ensure that all police and military units assigned to Papua have the equipment and resources needed to do their job effectively without seeking further funds or in-kind levies from the local population.
- Ensure that security forces deployed to Papua are adequately paid and that rent-seeking during short-term rotations is prohibited and punished.



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