

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND. 1949 TO 1962

The 1950's

The origins of United Nations involvement in West New Guinea began with the formation in 1949 of the UN Commission on Indonesia. This established the 'Round Table Conference' at The Hague, resulting in an agreement to transfer sovereignty of the Dutch East Indies from the Dutch to an Indonesian federation led by President Sukarno. It was the end of a bitter four year-struggle for independence by the Indonesians.

During the negotiations, the Netherlands had insisted on retaining sovereignty of West New Guinea, a position condemned by Indonesia as the continuance of Dutch colonialism and a "troublemaking anachronism."¹ Eventually it was agreed that further negotiations would take place to settle the matter within a year. Initial willingness by the Dutch to consider the Indonesian claim,² ceased with the formation of a unitary Indonesian Republic in August 1950. At talks with Jakarta four months later, the Netherlands were unprepared to hand the Papuans over to a centralised Javanese regime.

This decision was welcomed by other Western powers, particularly Australia. In 1950 Percy Spender, Canberra's Minister for External Affairs, made

plain that Indonesian control of West New Guinea would be an unwelcome move. He predicted that they would make “hostile and aggressive neighbours” and threaten Australian East New Guinea. He also considered any Asian expansion into New Guinea as an aid to the spread of communism on the island.³ The British also favoured Dutch retention of the territory for strategic reasons, since “its transfer to the Indonesian Government might be used as a precedent for a subsequent claim to British territory in Borneo.”⁴

Between 1954 and 1957, Indonesia submitted four draft resolutions on the issue to the UN General Assembly, but none were adopted. Privately, some Dutch officials were prepared in 1955 to consider a proposal by the Secretary-General to place West New Guinea under an internationally agreed trusteeship. This was seen as a solution which would avoid transferring the territory to Indonesia. At the time, though, there was little enthusiasm for this among politicians in The Hague.⁵

Disillusioned with the UNGA, in late 1957 Jakarta launched a campaign against the Dutch in Indonesia, expelling thousands and nationalising their businesses. These events marked the beginning of what Jon Reinhardt describes as the “third and final phase of the West Irian dispute, a skilful mixture of diplomacy and threats of military force.”⁶ It also coincided with an outbreak of regional rebellions against the government in Jakarta, which Washington exploited in an effort to move Indonesia into an anti-Communist alignment with the United States. The immediate objective was to “eliminate the Communist party [P.K.I], weaken the army’s strength in Java, and drastically clip the wings of, if not fully remove, President Sukarno.”⁷

Despite the domestic crisis, “deeply rooted support for national claims to West Irian existed throughout Indonesia, stretching all across the political spectrum.”⁸ The Indonesians were also convinced throughout the dispute that the Papuans shared their enthusiasm. Harper and Greenwood note:

Publicity in Indonesia about alleged Papuan uprisings against the Dutch oppression seems to have convinced even quite senior Indonesian officials that the Dutch grip was weakening.⁹

During this period, Canberra still favoured Dutch rule in New Guinea. On 6 November 1957, the two countries issued a joint statement concerning future development of the whole island. Although not said explicitly, the ultimate goal was to create a political association between the two halves. However, to avoid antagonising Jakarta, the policy had to be pursued on a completely confidential basis, and portrayed publicly as cooperation, rather than coordination.¹⁰ This was also the solution favoured by the British.¹¹ In Washington at this time, the policy was to “oppose, by appropriate measures, any attempt by a Communist-orientated Indonesia to seize West New Guinea.”¹²

However, following the failure of the regional rebellions, the West had to reassess its attitude towards Sukarno, particularly in view of his decision to support his diplomatic campaign for West New Guinea with a massive, Soviet-backed, arms build-up. Between 1961 and 1963, Jakarta spent approximately US\$2000 million on military equipment - about one half of its entire national budget. As the US Ambassador to Jakarta later commented:

Sukarno understood the tactics of *Realpolitik*. He was a master of painting himself into a corner and waiting for someone to

rescue him. In this situation, with the help of the Russians, he created a real threat of war. It was not a bluff.¹³

American Involvement and Moves Towards Papuan Self-rule

With the arrival of President Kennedy in 1961, Washington's attitude towards West New Guinea began to change and, unlike his predecessor Eisenhower, Kennedy was not opposed to possible US involvement to find a settlement. Nonetheless, there were still influential opponents of any shift of policy on the territory. In March 1961, the CIA sent a memorandum to the President's staff:

To appease Sukarno on the West Irian and other questions, and to compete with the Bloc in economic and military aid in the vain hope of gaining time - would, we believe, finally destroy the resolve of conservative elements to oppose Sukarno's policies and to act as a brake on the leftward and downward course of Indonesia.¹⁴

In the territory itself, the Dutch accelerated their efforts to prepare the territory for self-rule. Several political parties were formed and apart from one, whose membership consisted almost entirely of ethnic Indonesians, they all supported eventual Papuan independence. Evidence of Papuan support for independence was also noted in a report by an Australian official in February 1962: "The Papuans with whom I spoke at the various centres were unanimous in their conviction that they could not permit Indonesia to take over."¹⁵ At the same time, the academic Paul Van der Veur carried out a questionnaire survey in various towns of 329 Papuan pupils above the second year of secondary school. The respondents demonstrated a considerable degree of political awareness, and the

results showed an overwhelming support for eventual independence, and a rejection of Indonesian rule.¹⁶

Beginning in 1959, elected regional councils were set up in the territory, while at the same time, official policy was that “Democratization will be energetically pursued on the local and regional levels, but simultaneously a short-term central representative body will be established [the West New Guinea Council].” Independence was to be achieved by 1970. Furthermore, a Dutch policy paper from 1960 stated; “The ‘Papuanization’ of the administrative body will now become, to a greater extent than formerly, a matter of systematic and purposeful action.” As a target, the paper predicted “Papuanisation of the country will have increased from 52% in 1960 (almost entirely in the lower grades) to 93% in 1970.” Commenting on the importance of this, the paper continues, “It is essential for the Netherlands to see to it that, once the time for independence has come, a sufficient number of qualified indigenous inhabitants are available to take over the greatest part of the administration.”¹⁷ But with possibly over half the 700,000 population still living in remote areas outside Dutch administrative control, it would not be an easy task.

In February 1961, elections took place for the West New Guinea Council in an atmosphere which the *New York Times* praised as being, “devoid of racial feeling.”¹⁸ Around twenty per cent of administered Papuans voted, choosing between some 90 candidates to elect 16 councillors. A further 12 were selected by the Dutch for areas considered not yet ready for meaningful elections. There were three Dutch and two Eurasians on the council and the rest were Papuans. Terrence

Markin has dismissed the exercise as primarily designed by the Dutch to appeal to outsiders. However he supports his argument by incorrectly asserting that most councillors were appointed by the Dutch.¹⁹ Nonetheless, it is true that the council could only advise, rather than direct, the territory's governor, but it was designed as a first step in national politics, rather than an end result. Whatever its limitations, the council was a genuine attempt to accelerate the establishment of an indigenous political elite to eventually lead an independent West Papua.

The Luns Plan

In September 1961, Dutch Foreign Minister Luns presented a proposal to the UNGA on the territory's future. The 'Luns Plan' envisaged Dutch withdrawal from the territory and termination of sovereignty, to be replaced by a UN administration and the establishment of a "member state study commission." This would supervise the administration and organise a plebiscite to decide the territory's final status.²⁰

Some in Washington were hostile to the plan. Rostow, a National Security Affairs adviser, wrote to the President in October 1961. He expressed impatience with the Dutch and stated that Indonesian control of the territory was the only permanent solution to avoid Jakarta being "driven into the arms" of the Soviets. He also advised that the US should be frank with The Hague and tell them that self-determination for the "stone-age" Papuans was rather meaningless.²¹

Despite this, the US eventually voted in the UNGA with the Dutch on a resolution based upon the Luns Plan. Although the Netherlands was pleased to

receive more than half the vote, it was not enough to be passed by the Assembly. Meanwhile, on 1 December 1961, following a vote by the West New Guinea Council, the territory was renamed West Papua and given an anthem and a flag, which then flew alongside the Dutch tricolour. The Council also voted to support the Luns Plan and called on all nations to respect the right of the Papuans to self-determination.²²

Following the UNGA rejection of the Luns Plan; “the Dutch were suddenly left without a definite policy toward New Guinea except the one that followed before...and that policy was considered no longer adequate.”²³ Then on 19 December, Sukarno increased the pressure by issuing the “Peoples’ Triple Command” (TRIKORA), calling for the total mobilization of the Indonesian people to ‘liberate’ West Irian. Soon afterwards, the Dutch agreed to a request by acting Secretary-General U Thant to begin direct negotiations with Jakarta. Importantly, they dropped a precondition that talks could only be on the basis of the Papuan right to self-determination.²⁴

While the threat of an invasion undoubtedly forced the Dutch to negotiate, Indonesia’s campaign of sending in armed infiltrators to West New Guinea did not appear to pose a serious threat to security. An Australian official reported in February 1962:

Indonesian ‘infiltrators’ are regarded by the Dutch and Papuans as more of a joke than a nuisance.....I met several people, Dutch and Papuans, who had been concerned with the infiltrators in the Sorong area about last September [1961], and all expressed incredulity at the apparent Indonesian belief that the Papuan populace would rise up in revolt against the Dutch once the infiltrators had established a base in New Guinea....The Papuans

had regarded the rounding up of the infiltrators as a sort of sport.²⁵

Dutch/Indonesian Talks

At first, talks were delayed by an Indonesian pre-condition for prior agreement that the territory would ultimately become theirs. U Thant proposed a compromise in which the territory would be administered on behalf of the UN by two Asian countries, before its ultimate status was decided. The Dutch accepted, but Jakarta said no.²⁶

By now, Washington had concluded that Indonesia's peaceful takeover of the territory was necessary to undermine the communist threat to Jakarta. More pressure was therefore required on the Dutch to make them take "the final jump."

As one US official prophetically noted:

I can't blame Dutch for doubting that Indos have any intention of allowing genuine plebiscite five years or so from now. But the important thing is that some such Indo promise is the essential face-saving device Dutch have been seeking. We must get them to take it as best they can expect.²⁷

In February 1962 Attorney-General Robert Kennedy, the President's brother, travelled to Jakarta and the Hague in an effort to get the talks started. They finally began on 20 March in Middleburg, Virginia. Although sponsored by the US in all but name, the UN was selected as the official mediating body to provide "a cloak of unquestioned impartiality."²⁸ Washington chose Ellsworth Bunker, a US diplomat, as mediator. On being told by the US to appoint him, and issue invitations to the talks, U Thant allegedly expressed surprise, and commented that he had been led to believe by both sides that the UN would not be involved.²⁹

Washington would no longer accept, Luns' refusal to transfer the Papuans to Indonesia prior to self-determination. To force the issue, they proposed the establishment of a temporary UN administration, after which full control would pass to Jakarta. Only then, at some point, would 'self-determination' occur. The Dutch were informed of this "Bunker Plan" on 2 April 1962, two days after Jakarta. Luns' initial response was a bitter rejection and a condemnation of the US.³⁰ However, on 13 April the Dutch Cabinet held a twelve hour meeting in which Luns and his colleagues reluctantly decided not to reject the plan. Instead, they reassured each other that they could use it as a basic framework from which to secure political guarantees for the Papuans.³¹ In reality, they must have known that the plan was never intended to allow the Papuans any say in their future.

The reason for this Dutch capitulation was their unwillingness to fight a war which they felt they could not win.³² Neither Australia, Britain or crucially, the US would give any commitment to provide military support, and the Dutch, understandably, were not prepared to fight alone on a matter of principle. However, by the time The Hague accepted the inevitability of a transfer to Indonesia, they were, according to Markin, in such a weakened position that they had little leverage over the Indonesians:

in a sense, then, Bunker's task became one of holding hands, seeking to reassure the Dutch that they were doing alright until, at the end of the talks, The Hague realized that it had really won nothing on which to hang its claim of having negotiated an agreement that preserved Netherlands honor.³³

Before talks could reconvene, further delays occurred as both sides tried to interpret the Bunker Plan differently. Luns attempted, unsuccessfully, to obtain some political guarantees for the Papuans, but by the time the talks began again on 12 July, Indonesia was demanding a direct transfer without any prior UN administration. Although Ambassador Van Roijen, the Dutch negotiator, sometimes made concessions without first consulting The Hague,³⁴ he felt unable to agree to this. Eventually, despite further Indonesian threats to invade, agreement was reached for a UN administration of at least seven months (five months less than specified in the Bunker Plan). Nonetheless, Jakarta's acceptance came only after President Kennedy made clear to Indonesian Foreign Minister Subandrio that the US would blame Indonesia if war broke out after so much had been gained peacefully.³⁵

In the meantime, Jakarta rejected suggestions by Stavropoulos, the UN legal counsel, for the appointment of a UN team led by a Commissioner to remain in the territory after transfer to Indonesia. Their task would have been to assist in preparations for Papuan self-determination and then submit a report. Indonesia's key objection to the plan was that, before the act of self-determination could take place, the UNGA would need to vote on whether to approve the arrangements for it.³⁶

In the end, less precise terminology was accepted. Another late concession by Van Roijen, which would have great relevance later, was the omission of the words 'plebiscite' or 'referendum' in the agreement.³⁷

Summary

Finally, on 15 August 1962, the New York Agreement was signed. Within six weeks, a UN administration was running the territory, and in less than nine months, control passed to Jakarta. It was a great victory for Indonesia, but all shades of political opinion in The Hague generally considered it to be an “exceedingly bad deal.”³⁸ The only achievement of the Dutch was to avoid war. But by this stage, it was something many in the Netherlands were relieved to accept.

In retrospect, Dutch complacency, and their under-estimation of Indonesia’s resolve, denied the Papuans any real chance of independence. A concerted Dutch/Australian effort in 1949 to prepare the whole island for self-government, might have created, by the 1960’s, a level of internationally-recognised Melanesian national feeling sufficient to undermine severely Jakarta’s claim that West Irian belonged with them. But in the event, the Netherlands ran out of time.

For the West, and particularly the US, though, the agreement was seen as an important victory in the struggle to prevent Indonesia drifting into the communist ‘camp.’ Even Canberra, a long-standing supporter of the Dutch was, by January 1962, “giving active encouragement to the transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia.”³⁹

London was also satisfied. In 1959, it had made a confidential commitment to offer the Dutch logistical support in the event of war.⁴⁰ But in February 1962, a

British Chiefs of Staff paper voiced concern that such assistance risked precipitating colonial unrest, particularly in Singapore. Furthermore, “It might well jeopardise negotiations for the establishment of Greater Malaysia and our future use of the Singapore base.”⁴¹ Elsewhere, in West Germany, one Foreign Ministry official remarked “West New Guinea did not really matter, once the Indonesians get it, it might become a ‘desert’ but who really cares?”⁴²

For the Soviets, the settlement was arguably a disappointment. The dispute had assured their influence as the major arms supplier to Indonesia at a time when increasing US involvement in Indo-China made the archipelago a strategically important area.

In the end, though, it was the Papuans who had most to lose from the settlement. They played no part in the negotiations, but they would be the ones who would have to live with the consequences.

CHAPTER ONE

NOTES

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