

Local Media, Regional Sensitivities

Reporting West Papua's Independence Movement in the Papua New Guinean Press

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The media in their privileged position as the makers and shapers of public opinion have a responsibility to ensure fair and balanced coverage in the context of crisis situations in the Pacific—for refugees in Nauru and Manus Island, those on the borders of PNG and West Papua, IDPs in Fiji and the Solomon Islands (Action, 2002: 1).

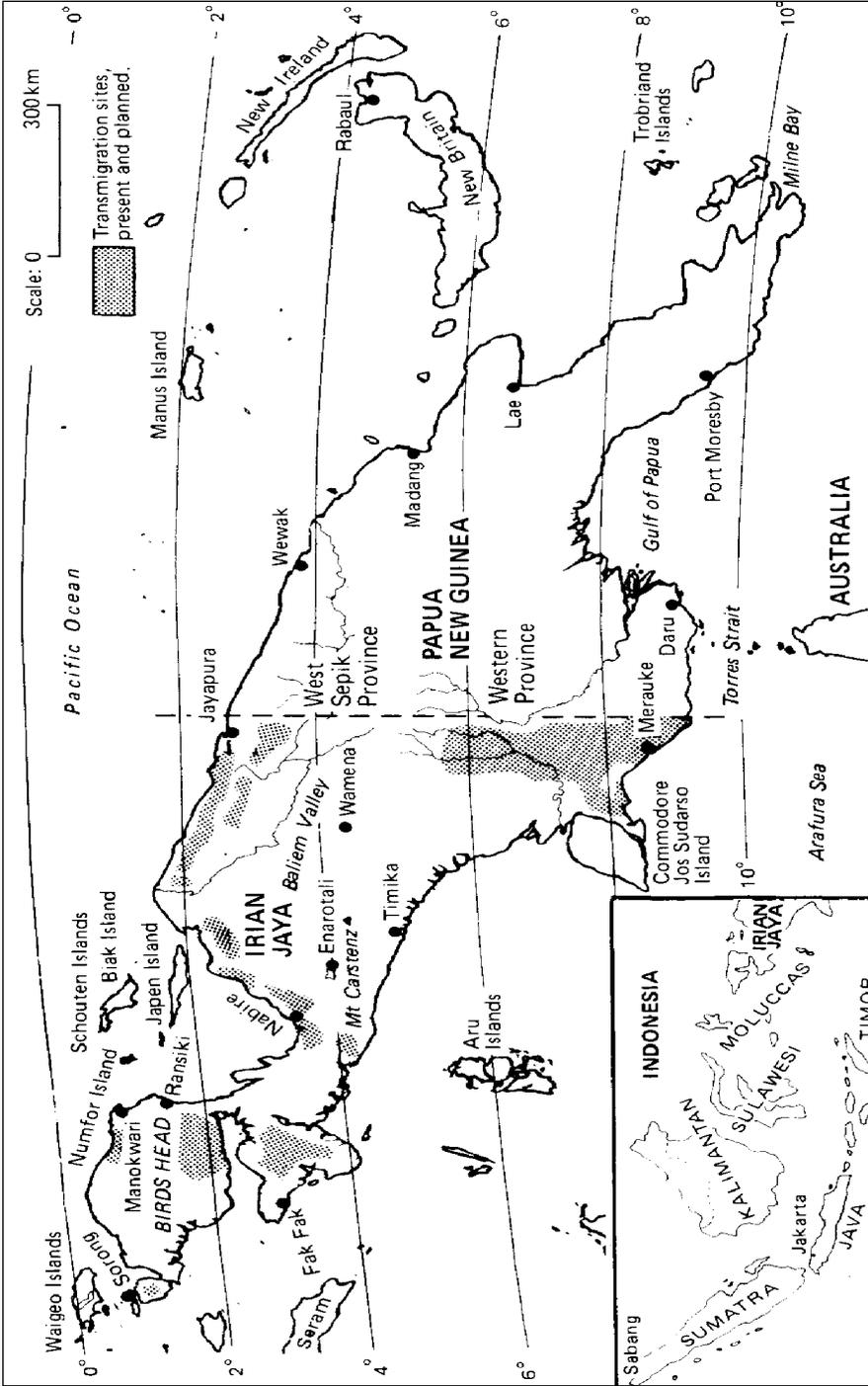
West Papua's struggle for independence from Indonesia has gone largely unnoticed by the international media. It is sporadically covered by the neighbouring and regional media, usually in times of crisis when there are clashes between Oganisasi Papua Mederka (OPM) and Indonesian armed forces, or when there are protests against the Freeport McMoRan mining company that operates the world's biggest gold deposit.

When covering the issue, news media need to contend with the geopolitical complexities involving Indonesia's growing political influence in the region. This influence discourages neighbours and the international community from taking a position on what is considered a national matter out of fear of destabilising the country and the region.

There has been a major shift in coverage over the last 20 years indicating a decline in stories on West Papua and a general lack of interest from Papua New Guinea media to invest time and effort for proper coverage. The decline in media coverage today is not easily justified considering that PNG is the only neighbouring country that shares not only land borders but also a Melanesian heritage with West Papua and is currently hosting several thousand West Papuan refugees. The assumption is that this is due to regional geopolitics (PNG's increasingly closer relationship with Indo-

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FIGURE 7.1
Map of West Papua's borders with PNG



Source: Osborne, R. (1985), *Indonesia's Secret War* (p. xii). Sydney: Allen & Unwin

nesia and Australia's influence on PNG's regional politics) and a general decline in journalism practice in the PNG media.

A comparative content analysis of three PNG newspapers at two different time frames was carried out in order to study the shift in press coverage. In addition, in-depth interviews with journalists involved in the reporting of West Papua were conducted in order to better understand the media's role in covering the neighbour's independence movement. Interviews with West Papuan individuals living in PNG focusing on first-hand accounts and their perceptions of how they are represented in the PNG media contributed significantly to the researchers' understanding of the situation.

The West Papua conflict

A former Dutch colony known at different times with different names, Netherlands New Guinea (until 1962), West Irian (1962–1973) and Irian Jaya (1973–2000), Papua, as it is currently internationally recognised, is a province of Indonesia and the other half of the island of New Guinea. It borders the independent state of Papua New Guinea to the east. Those who do not recognise the legitimacy of Indonesia's claim to Papua refer to the area as West Papua (*New Internationalist*, 2002: 13; Osborne, 1985).

When the Dutch ceded the Dutch East Indies to the Indonesia Republic in 1949, they excluded Dutch New Guinea on the premise that it was geographically and ethnically different and that it should eventually be given self-determination. They started preparing the territory for independence in the fifties and encouraged the setting up of the first Papuan parliament that was expected to design and implement full independence by 1970. The New Guinea Council decided on the national symbols including a national anthem, flag (Morning Star) and on the country's new name that was to be West Papua (*ibid.*). However, Cold War politics determined the fate of West Papua. The United States, concerned about the potential rise of communism in Southeast Asia, put pressure on the Netherlands and Australia to change their position that supported West Papua's independence. This resulted in the surrender of the Dutch territory to Indonesia (see Osborne, 1985; Budjiardjo and Lien Soei Liong, 1983; Rumakiek, 2004).

In an agreement signed by Indonesia and the Netherlands, and ratified in the UN in 1962, it was stipulated that authority would transfer to a UN temporary Executive Authority that would eventually hand the territory to Indonesia in 1963 until such time as an UN-conducted "Act of Free Choice" could determine the West Papuans' will. What followed was the end of the New Guinea Council's work by the Indonesian government, which forbade the use of any national symbols. Resistance was organised around that time and the Free Papua Movement (OPM, Organisasi Papua Merdeka) was set up in 1964 (*ibid.*). West Papua was formally annexed by Indonesia under the controversial Act of Free Choice sponsored by the UN in 1969; a decision based on the voting of tribal leaders who were forced to vote in favour of Indonesia's rule (*ibid.*). Sydney Morning Herald's editorial on this event, titled "Neo-colonialism" argued against this decision and foresaw the arising issues:

The alternative to an Indonesian colony is an independent West New Guinea, aided by the UN, by the Netherlands and by Australia and looking forward ultimately to political association with an independent eastern New Guinea. In realistic terms, by ignoring the fact that New Guinea is ethnically and geographically an entity and that all the “*musyawarah*” [an Indonesian word describing a process of decision making by consensus] in the world cannot turn Melanesian Papuans into Indonesians, we are helping to prepare the ground for a Papuan irredentist movement and laying up grave trouble in store for New Guinea and consequently for ourselves (quoted in Osborne, 1985: 47).

The Australians were concerned about the impact this might have on the eastern part of the island that they administered under UN mandate and which they were preparing for independence. However, bigger regional politics overrode these concerns. Since then, West Papuans have strived for their independence with an on-going conflict that has resulted in several thousands of refugees.

The unspoken element in the argument against or for West Papua’s independence was and has been the rich mineral resources of the region (Martinikus, 2002: 20). West Papua has the world’s largest copper and gold mine, operated by the US company Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold and is the Indonesian government’s biggest tax-payer (*New Internationalist*, 2002: 12). The latest protests against the mine in March 2006 were extensive, with several victims of violence and were indirectly linked to the issue of independence (Pacific Media Watch, 17 March 2006).

Today, there are reports of serious human rights violations by Indonesian army, militias and Islamic militants (e.g. Laskar Jihad) (*New Internationalist*, 2002; 2005: 4–5; Martinikus, 2002: 59; 2006). In the last decade, Indonesia has also accelerated its transmigration programme in an effort to consolidate further Indonesian rule of the region (*ibid.*).

There have been some efforts from the Indonesian government in the past to address the West Papuan issue. During the Abdurrahman Wahid administration in 2000, West Papua gained a special autonomy status. He helped fund the Congress from which a united West Papuan independence movement emerged. However, this new “softer” policy changed when Megawati Sukarnoputri took over power, which saw the region subdivided into smaller provinces (*New Internationalist*, 2002: 10; Rumakiek, 2004).

Indonesia sees itself as the legal successor to all territories of the former Netherlands East Indies. It argues this on an international principle, which asserts that boundaries of nascent post-colonial countries conform to their pre-sovereign ones (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Port Moresby, 2001: 3). As far as West Papuans are concerned, West Papua is a case of Asian colonialism (West Papuans’ interview with authors, 9 May 2006; see also the Kennedy Report on West Papua, 2006). This was also the sentiment of regional leaders who had condemned the transfer of West Papua to Indonesia as an Asiatic colonialism (Somare, quoted in Osborne, 1985: 44).

However, despite the interest and moral support, only Vanuatu has taken concrete action by allowing West Papuans to open an information office in its capital (Rumakiek, 2004). The general feeling as expressed by the OPM’s international

spokesman, John Ondowame, is that as long as countries of the Pacific Islands do not support the issue of West Papua, the issue will never go beyond the regional borders (Pacific Media Watch, 11 April 2006).

Australia's decision to grant asylum visas to several West Papuan refugees early in 2006 caused a heavy diplomatic rift and media-based backlash between the two countries. Australia's subsequent efforts to minimise the harm over the granting of asylum visas by trying to reassure Indonesia that they were not trying to undermine its sovereignty and territorial integrity indicates Indonesia's strong political influence in the region. Papua New Guinea was involved in this process as some more West Papuans tried to reach Australia via PNG. Once more, a crisis put West Papua on the regional media's map.

West Papua and foreign media

It is an undeniable fact that the West Papuan struggle for independence is one of the least reported conflicts both regionally and internationally. Tim Sharp calls the West Papuan struggle one of the Australian media's most neglected areas of coverage in more than three decades (2006).

Even when West Papua becomes a story in foreign media, the focus often gets away from the actual cause of the conflict, hijacked by regional politics played at a higher diplomatic level between governments and other organisations and with not enough West Papuan voices heard.

The lack of information on West Papua is also largely due to restrictions imposed on foreign journalists seeking to travel to the region. Previous records indicate Indonesian state efforts to obstruct the flow of information about West Papua to both Indonesian and foreign media, as McDougall reported in the late 1980s.

The official blackout is more effective than the one for East Timor. The Indonesian press remains under tight strictures not to become curious about, much less report, anything about armed conflict, casualties, or even detentions in Irian Jaya. Consequently, the ... conflict in Irian Jaya is as unknown to most Indonesians as it is to most foreigners (quoted in Kirsch, 2002: 72).

The availability of local information through West Papuan media is also limited. Local papers, like *Cepos Cederawasih Pos* and *Tifa Irian*, both in Indonesian, are owned or run by Army/TNI and politicians (Werror, interview with authors, 9 May 2006; Pacific Media Watch, 5 May 2006). Press freedom is absent when reporting on local matters.

According to Martinikus, an Australian journalist who visited West Papua in 2002, the region's remoteness and the Indonesian military have made it very difficult for journalists to visit the area. Journalists requesting visas to travel to West Papua often have their requests denied. To travel undercover is to risk arrest, which has become increasingly common. Journalists who do succeed in entering the area are heavily monitored and intimidated (Martinikus, 2002: 54; [FPcN](#), November 2005; Mote, 2007). The Jakarta Foreign Correspondents Club confirmed in February 2006 that for more than a year no foreign correspondent had received permission to go to West Papua. Restrictions have been in place for some time, with temporary press

cards clearly indicating that they are not for visits to Aceh or Maluku (Martinikus, 2006).

Many journalists have also been deterred by the mysterious deaths of journalists and arrests and torture of human rights workers (Evans, 2004). The death of Mark Worth, a PNG-born Australian journalist, in 2004 by unknown causes in West Papua was treated as suspicious as it came two days after the announcement by ABC television of the screening of his documentary *Land of the Morning Star*. It was believed to be linked to the footage screened by Australian channel SBS's *Dateline* programme in 2003 of OPM leaders making appeals to the international community to help bring a peaceful solution. Two days after the programme, several West Papuans, including one of the leaders seen in the film, were killed in a raid by Indonesian army (*Asia Media*, 2004).

The ban on all foreign media, churches and NGOs was enforced on the argument that their presence in West Papua would “encourage Papuans to campaign on issues of human rights” (IFJ, 2006). The International Federation of Journalists complained to the Indonesian government about the ban, stating that “the silencing and censoring of the media will only fuel misinformation and foster conditions for abuse, mistreatment and corruption” and that “the denial of foreign media access to West Papua suggests an attempt to conceal human rights abuses” (ibid.).

It is in this information-poor environment that the West Papuan conflict has been taking place and has largely been overlooked by the regional and international press. Lack of financial support has held back the OPM and OPM Revolutionary Council in their activities campaigning for their cause through the media, as the OPMRC chairman, Moses Werror, has argued (e-mail communication with Papoutsaki, 3 June 2006). The long struggle has drained the resources of many West Papuan leaders and international supporters. There is information available online through numerous websites such as the OPMRC webpage set up in Hokkaido, Japan (ibid.). However, these sources attract those already interested in the conflict and do not have the same impact as the mainstream media on public opinion.

At least one country in the region, Papua New Guinea, should have been in a better position to report on the issue of West Papua, mainly because of the large numbers of refugees living along and inside its borders and the cultural affiliation that bonds these two ends of the island.

West Papua in the PNG press: A content analysis

A content analysis of the Papua New Guinea press provides a comparative view of variations in coverage. It focused on the press, taking two newspapers during two different time periods: *The Times of Papua New Guinea* (weekly, English) and *Post-Courier* (daily, English) during March-May 1984 and *The National* (daily, English) and *Post-Courier* in March-May 2006. These two periods were chosen, as they both featured a refugee crisis, albeit of a different scale, involving PNG and Australia in different degrees. Therefore, most attention is paid to stories relevant to West Papuans as refugees/asylum seekers to make the content analysis of the two periods more comparable.

The Times ceased publication in the mid 1990s but it is used in the content analysis to indicate the difference in weekly newspapers in terms of in-depth coverage and the impact of its absence in recent West Papua coverage. *The National* is used only in the second time period as it started publishing in 1993.

TABLE 7.1
Content analysis criteria

<i>National/Regional international news</i>	<i>Section of the newspaper</i>
News type	Hard news, feature
Prominence	Front page, pages 2–3, pages 4–5, other sections
Source by by-line	PNG journalists, foreign correspondents, international news agency, no by-line
Source by voice heard	West Papuans: OPM/refugees/others, PNG individuals/organisations Government and other authorities: Indonesian, PNG, Australian, UNHCR, Churches, other
Focus	WP, WP/Australia, WP refugees/Australia, Indonesia/Australia, Indonesia/PNG, WP/PNG, WP refugees/PNG, other

These criteria were defined partly on a preliminary content analysis that indicated what stories were covered and partly on the understanding of the authors of what elements would be important in covering this issue. Each newspaper was analysed on its own and compared against the other and both sets of newspapers were compared in terms of time coverage.

The main hypothesis was that PNG press coverage of West Papua has declined over the years and this is due to regional geopolitics and a general decline in journalistic professional standards in the PNG press. Other assumptions put forward were: PNG press current cover of West Papua is minimal; West Papuan refugees in PNG have been receiving inadequate cover by PNG media; PNG press cover of West Papua is influenced by PNG's relationship with Indonesia; PNG press relies heavily on international news agencies, Australian media cover and official sources on covering the West Papuan situation.

The findings

The findings from the March-May 2006 content analysis when compared with the same period in 1984 confirm the main hypothesis, which indicates a dramatic decline in number, length, direct and multi-sourcing and voices heard in the covered stories. The following break-up of the findings by time period and newspaper provides more supporting details.

March-April 1984: The Times, Post-Courier

The total number of stories run by the *Times of PNG* and *Post-Courier* in the March-April period, 1984 on West Papua was 133 not counting opinion and editorial pieces. A selection of 73 stories directly relating to refugees and border crossers were chosen for analysis. These stories were illustrated by 47 photographs and graphics.

Of the 73 stories, 66 were hard-news stories and *The Times* had seven feature stories containing detailed interviews, excerpts of speeches and background pieces. A total of 20 stories made the front pages, and 36 were on the second and third pages. The rest of the stories appeared on local pages inside both newspapers.

Most of the stories in the papers (totalling 38) were written by PNG journalists but interestingly, a high number of stories had no by-lines (27). The lack of by-lines could be attributed to the policy of the newspapers. Foreign correspondents contributed two stories while international news agencies had five stories in the *Post-Courier*.

For source by voice(s), the majority of the stories (52) had a single source; followed by 18 stories based on two sources and only six had multiple voices. In most of the stories, the voices of the PNG government dominated (17), followed by Indonesia (14) and PNG organisations (14). The voices of these organisations were all concerned about the refugees. The voice of OPM (6) is next, followed by refugees (4), PNG individuals (4), churches (4), others (4), Australia (3) and UNHCR (2). The voices of PNG organisations are prominent here because law organisations, students, and other government and private agencies became involved in the issue.

With regard to the focus of the stories, West Papuan refugees/PNG dominated (40), which is expected considering the period was the beginning of the mass exodus of the 10,000 refugees into PNG. As a result, Indonesia/PNG had the next highest focus (11), as the two countries debated the plight of the refugees. West Papua/PNG had the next highest focus (7) as well as West Papua (7) and that was because *The Times* featured the OPM struggle prominently. Focus on Indonesia/Australia was minimal (2) and West Papua/Australia (1). There were six stories that focussed on the Dutch/West Papua and West Papua/Indonesia, which were not part of the criteria in this analysis.

One can conclude that in 1984 there was comprehensive coverage of West Papua generated by the high number of activities happening on the border of PNG and Indonesia and a massive movement of refugees across to PNG. The journalists covered stories on the ground at the border, across in Jayapura and also as far as Jakarta. Media organisations moved journalists around and provided good contacts and sources.

Among the prominent voices of the PNG and Indonesian government authorities, organisations in PNG also featured equally. These reflected the interest that groups like the university and tertiary students, lawyers, provincial governments, fundraising groups and Red Cross had in the refugee issues and came out in the media in support for their well-being.

March to April 2006: The National, Post-Courier

There were a total of 70 stories and two photo stories. The photo stories, both by AAP, were included as they were the only news that made front page. One picture

showed East Awin camp refugees being transported and was accompanied by a small caption demonstrating the difficult transportation conditions in the area. The other pictured West Papuan demonstrators during the demonstrations against the Freeport mining company in Jakarta on 28 February 2006. It was accompanied by a largish caption.

The *Post-Courier* had 43 stories, of which 12 were in the national news section and 31 in the regional news section. *The National* had almost half the stories, with 25 plus the two photo stories. Only four were in the national news section and 21 in regional. Regional news dominated the West Papua coverage because of the West Papuan asylum seekers' arrival in Australia and the subsequent diplomatic rift with Indonesia, which dominated the coverage. Although there were cases of West Papuans crossing the borders to PNG, some on their way to Australia, these stories received much less attention.

Almost all the stories in both newspapers were hard news, except for two articles in the opinion section of *The National* on the Australian/Indonesian diplomatic rift, one on the latest West Papuan unrest and another one in the weekend section on a missionary's work with West Papuan refugees in PNG. In terms of prominence, most stories were on pages 4 and 5 and in other sections of the newspapers and with some exceptions, most were short articles with many coming under "briefs".

When it came to source by by-line, the majority of the stories were from international/regional news agencies, mostly from AAP (57 stories, plus the two photo stories). Only seven had PNG journalists' by-lines with another eight PNG national news stories with no by-lines. Some of the stories without by-lines could have been sourced from international news agencies as there was little or no direct reporting from a PNG source.

Regarding source by voice(s), the majority of the stories (43) were based on a single source, followed by stories with two sources. Only 12 were multi-voice. In most stories, these sources were officials (government and other authorities) with the Indonesian government dominating (35), and Australia coming second (16); PNG government and other authorities were voiced in nine stories, while West Papuan refugees were voiced in only eight stories and mostly through representatives (lawyers, human rights activists). Both newspapers followed a similar pattern.

Regarding the focus of the stories, the Indonesian/Australian dispute over the recent asylum seekers was the dominant focus point (27) with stories on the recent unrest in WP and the demonstrations against Freeport coming second (20, plus one photo story). While both newspapers followed similar patterns in their regional news stories, the *Post-Courier* devoted more stories (9) in its national news section on recent WP refugees in PNG. Most of these stories concerned the uncertain identity of three Indonesian citizens washed ashore on a PNG island north of the country. Over the period of three months, it never became clear if these individuals, initially thought to be fishermen, were in fact West Papuan students from Jayapura fleeing the recent unrest.

The dominant voices in these stories were from the Indonesian Embassy in Port Moresby and PNG police and other authorities. The only story on PNG's policy regarding West Papua and Indonesia was reported also by the *Post-Courier*. Titled

“Rethink Papua Policy”, it was based on a press release by Opposition Leader O’Niel. It argued that PNG’s non-interference policy on political issues in Indonesia’s Papuan province needed to be reviewed and stated that “the present policy of appeasement is based on fear towards Indonesia” (Rheeney, 2006a). This is the only news indicating the nature of PNG and Indonesia’s connection, implying an unequal relationship.

There were only two stories and the one front-page photo story on the existing refugees in PNG and their living conditions. The *Post-Courier* devoted a “brief” in the national news section on West Papuan refugees living on Manus island getting access to safe water (Thursday, 13 April: 3). *The National* devoted a feature article by Lloyd Jones, AAP PNG correspondent, on a missionary working in East Awin refugee camps. Although the churches are the main service providers in the area, and they certainly deserved to be heard, it is interesting that the journalist chose to focus entirely on the voice of the missionary without letting the refugees voice their issues directly.

Summarising the findings from the comparison of the two newspapers, most stories were dominated by regional hard news originating from international news agencies (mostly AAP), were short and with almost no in-depth analysis of the issues mentioned, had mostly single sources, with the Indonesian government/authorities being the dominant voice, followed by Australia, and mostly focused on the relationship of Indonesia/Australia, neglecting to give voice to the West Papuans either as refugees or in any other capacity. This shifting coverage of West Papua in the PNG press indicates a shifting relationship not only between the two parts of the island but also between PNG and Indonesia.

West Papua and PNG: A shifting relationship

In 1969, Papua New Guinea’s current Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare, then a member of the Papua and New Guinea’s Territorial Assembly, accused Australia of maintaining “concentration camps” along the border for West Papuan asylum seekers. He told the Assembly:

We often hear the UN condemning European colonialism but it never thinks of condemning Asiatic colonialism, and this is what is happening now on our border and it is colonialism on the part of Indonesians (Osborne, 1985: 44).

Somare was later to become a leader that Indonesia would call “a good friend”. He was responsible for establishing the bilateral relationship with Indonesia two years before independence, followed by a Treaty of Mutual Respect, Friendship and Cooperation signed in 1986 (Osborne, 1985). The treaty has been responsible for a much closer relationship between the two countries’ military forces at the border. Kilvert, an Australian journalist, has written of the close relations between the PNG and Indonesian military forces based on the border, often involving rewards given to local PNG Defence Forces commanders, intelligence officers and federal MPs for their cooperation (Martinikus, 2002: 8; Map, 2001). The predicament that Somare found himself in, from being a critic to a friend of Indonesia, is one that is shared by other Melanesian leaders and people in PNG. Most Papua New Guineans sympathise

with and support the cause of their Melanesian neighbours in West Papua but are forced to also acknowledge Indonesia's sovereignty.

The PNG media have also found themselves in this situation when reporting on West Papua-related stories, especially the West Papuan refugees issue which has been a regular feature since the West Papua/Indonesia conflict began. What identity to give to the West Papuans fleeing across the border was a dilemma the government of PNG and the media had to decide on. In order to avoid offending Indonesia, the PNG government chose to call these people "non-traditional" or "illegal" border-crossers, although the status of the West Papuans fulfilled the criteria of being classified as refugees (Osborne, 1985: 102). This has resulted in conflicting descriptions of the fleeing West Papuans who would sometimes be referred to both as border crossers and refugees. For example on 29 February 1984, a *Post-Courier* headline on page 2 announced "Future of Irian Jaya refugees in doubt" while the lead paragraph of the same story read: "The future of Irian Jayan border crossers is still uncertain, according to the Justice Minister, Mr Bais." The Indonesians preferred the safer term "border crossers" (used to describe traditional crossers) to refugees which would attract UNHCR and the world's attention.

The number of West Papuans fleeing their homes and coming into Papua New Guinea rose dramatically in 1984 presenting a dilemma for the PNG government. Not wanting to upset Indonesia, the PNG government not only refused to recognise these people as refugees but also went to the extent of prosecuting them for illegally crossing the border with a view to repatriating them. The general reaction in PNG was one of outrage and the government was heavily criticised (*Post-Courier*, 1984: 3).

Osborne points out that for many months the PNG government prevented UNHCR access to the refugees in the hope of preventing the issue being internationally recognised. It also stopped the churches and NGO groups from providing humanitarian aid. However, the PNG media was generally sympathetic with the plight of the West Papuan refugees, and continued to highlight the issue. There was a serious backlash to the government policy of playing down the growing refugee problem when, in August 1984, Pastor Roy Woods of the Evangelical Church of Papua revealed through the member for North Fly, Warren Dutton, that 51 refugees had starved to death in one of the camps.

The report was published by the *Post-Courier* (August 13, 1984) and in September 27, graphic pictures of starving and dying women and children at the camps were displayed in *The Times of Papua New Guinea* juxtaposed with a headline that read: "Holiday camps?" A few weeks before, a PNG government Foreign Affairs official had said: "We do not want people coming across the border for a holiday" (Togarewa, 1984). The PNG government was stung into action, recognising the crossers as refugees and allowing UNHCR to become involved.

There are currently 10,400 West Papuan refugees in PNG, of which 3400 are living in East Awin refugee camps while 7,000 are living in eight camps close to the PNG border. The UNHCR and Border Affairs Division of PNG government administer the East Awin camp while those in other camps who have decided against moving to East Awin are not recognised as refugees. They get assistance from a few expatriate staff, missionaries and volunteers who provide basic services.

According to the UNHCR Country Report Plan for 2006, the PNG government acceded to the 191 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees and in 1996 endorsed a “Limited Integration” policy that allowed West Papuan refugees who had been relocated to East Awin to be granted Permissive Residency status. As permissive residents they enjoy (conditional) freedom of movement; can engage in business activities; enrol in PNG schools and tertiary institutions; and access health facilities. Restrictions include not residing in the border areas of Western and Sepik Provinces, not engaging in political activities, not having voting rights and not having the right to membership of political parties.

West Papua and the PNG media

The media in PNG has also not been consistent in reporting refugees’ issues. While there are currently 10,400 refugees in PNG, very little is being reported about them. Harlene Joku, a former journalist of West Papuan origin who had written a lot about West Papua in *The Times of PNG* and *The National* said the newspapers did not usually assign her to cover West Papua. She said she did the stories on her own initiative. One of her stories was on the refugees in East Awin, which she said she did because it was the International Year for Refugees. She had to do a proposal letter to the management and then liaised with the High Commission for Refugees in Port Moresby to get to East Awin (interview with the author, Matbob, 31 March 2006).

Former editor of *The Times* Franz-Albert Joku was also concerned about this.

... [T]he media tends to focus more on the plight of people who are in similar situation elsewhere yet right on our backyard or doorstep or even in our own country in the case of the many thousands who have been allowed to enter, there is very little discussion going on to the extent that some of us are beginning to question about the refugees being held or continue to be held in quarantine camps such as East Awin for example, we are talking about these camps being opened up many years ago maybe 15 years ago.

– Interview with the author, Matbob, 31 March 2006

Yet there is regular information about the refugee situation in PNG available on the UNHCR website that journalists can access, such as stories of constant tensions between the refugees and Papua New Guinean landowners or PNG government authorities that rarely get in the media. The refugees are often in a vulnerable position and are often mistreated by locals from nearby villages or those authorised to care for them. Matbob, one of the authors and a journalist with *The Times* from 1985–89, recalls that while covering West Papuan refugee stories he had to report about complaints from authorities in Vanimo town about a sex trade between Black Water refugee women and public servants in Vanimo.

Recently though, a number of West Papuans have started seeking asylum in Australia rather than in PNG. They seem to attract more regional and international media attention, which helps publicise their cause as a West Papuan activist stated recently in the media (Rheeney, 2006). As for PNG, a country that has been vigorously covering West Papua for many years, there is little coverage of recent happenings. Whatever is obtained is presented in briefs as regional or international stories and

not as a local story happening in the neighbourhood. A recent report by Australian media of plans to divert some asylum seekers back to PNG received no attention in the PNG media.

The PNG media in their coverage of West Papua have tended to follow the conventional patterns of news coverage that is defined by the Western journalism principles of “what is news”. The pattern sees a rise in coverage when there are activities deemed newsworthy and a decrease when there are no “newsworthy” activities. As a result, West Papuan coverage in the PNG media tended to increase when there was a large influx of border crossers into PNG following clashes between OPM (Organisasi Papua Merdeka) and the Indonesian military and police. A number of kidnappings by OPM also made news regularly. This meant that there was coverage in the issues of the only daily newspaper in the country at the time—*Post-Courier*—as well as coverage on the national broadcaster that was the Australian Broadcasting Corporation at the time. The coverage dropped when there were no clashes or border crossers and limited activity.

While this tends to be the general pattern of coverage, there have also been other factors that have contributed to putting West Papua on the PNG media agenda. For instance, the post-war publicity on the decolonisation process in the Pacific region included West Papua among the emerging nations. During the years of independence there was also the new breed of educated Papua New Guinean nationalists, some of whom ended up working in the media and were directly responsible for promoting the West Papuan cause. These included people like Anna Solomon, former editor of *Wantok Niuspepa* and general manager of Word Publishing company; Neville Togarewa, former senior reporter with *The Times of PNG*; Franz-Albert Joku, former editor of *The Times*; and others.

The foreign media also helped by establishing their own correspondents in PNG. The Australian media had a significant presence, including *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Melbourne Age*, ABC and AAP (Joku interview with Matbob, 31 April 2006). The presence of these media correspondents among the local journalists meant there was healthy competition for stories, and West Papua was well covered in PNG and in the region. At the outset, the world’s interest in stories such as West Papua stemmed from issues of stability in the region and conflicts among the new emerging independent states and how these were seen in light of the Cold War conflict in Europe.

Some journalists of the PNG media also had a personal interest in the issue. These journalists were of West Papuan origin. They had a personal motive for keeping West Papua in the media both locally and internationally. These journalists were also invaluable to both the local and international media because they had direct contacts in West Papua who kept them informed despite attempts by Indonesia to suppress information. They helped to create an interest among their Papua New Guinean counterparts who were mostly sympathetic with their Melanesian neighbours and ensured that their cause was well covered. It was the PNG journalists (and some foreign ones) who actually crossed over a number of times into West Papua to visit OPM camps and write stories about the conditions and struggles along the border.

Changes in the PNG media

With the OPMRC headquarters based in PNG, sourcing information should not be a problem. Its chairman, Moses Werror, living in Madang town for several years, has used his base in PNG to promote the cause internationally with petitions to the UN and the Indonesian government. He commented that while in the past journalists were in touch with him, this has changed in the last few years (e-mail communication with Papoutsaki, 3/5/06; 4/5/06). This shift has many causes.

From the early 1990s onwards, the presence of foreign correspondents in PNG began to fade as their offices closed. Conflicts erupting in other parts of the world meant that media organisations began concentrating scarce resources away from the Pacific region.

In Papua New Guinea, the vibrant free press has faced a number of challenges, including two attempts by the government to control the media with the Ramoi media bill in 1987 and the Chan's Constitutional Review Commission in 1996 which were largely unsuccessful because of public opposition (Dorney, 1999). The independent press's heavy reliance on government advertising was seen to undermine editorial independence in newsrooms (Solomon, 1995). Politicians have continued to blame the media for being responsible for PNG's poor image overseas and the government has remained reluctant to issue visas to foreign journalists to cover stories in PNG.

There have also been changes within PNG affecting the local media, with the demise of the premier weekly newspaper, *The Times of Papua New Guinea* and the daily *Niugini Nius*, while the national broadcaster NBC, funded by the government, was virtually crippled by funding cuts. *The Times of Papua New Guinea* and its sister paper *Wantok* had provided regular and in-depth coverage of West Papua and, in general, stories to do with justice, law and order, and environment issues. There has also been a shift in the focus of the media, especially the radio stations, with the opening up of commercial radio stations that included FM 100 and the PNG FM stations. These stations place more emphasis on entertainment rather than news and information.

Many of the key journalists (named above) who were responsible for the coverage of West Papua in the early years moved on to other occupations. The journalists who replaced them were young journalism graduates who did not have the same background knowledge and experience on the West Papuan issue. The contacts that the journalists had when covering West Papua seem to have faded. One such contact in Madang remarked that the prolonged struggle may have been a reason why the interest of the PNG media has waned (Werror, interview with the authors, 9 May 2006).

The current limited coverage of West Papua by PNG media does nothing to correct the general lack of information available to those who could perhaps make a difference in terms of shaping public perceptions and government attitudes on West Papua and West Papuans in the country.

The Indonesian PR machine

The Indonesian government representatives in Papua New Guinea have been successful in recent years in improving their image in association with the coverage of West Papua in the PNG media. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Indonesian embassy in Port Moresby was having great difficulty handling the negative image of Indonesia in the PNG media. In fact, the standard reaction was to make no comment when journalists sought information concerning West Papua.

Anna Solomon, former editor of *Wantok*, recalls that the policy of her newspaper then was “to always verify the news that we got with the Indonesian embassy here in Port Moresby. Most of the time we did not get any response at all” (interview with Matbob, 21 April 2006). However, this changed in the 1990s with Indonesian officials taking the initiative to invite journalists to the embassy for functions and also to organise trips for them to visit West Papua and other parts of Indonesia.

The governments of PNG and Indonesia have formalised bilateral agreements, benefiting a number of Papua New Guinean organisations, including the journalists. More positive stories about Indonesia have been appearing in the media from time to time. For instance, *The National* recently reported that PNG teachers from the Sepik region, bordering West Papua to the north, were learning Bahasa Indonesia in Bali with the aim of preparing PNG students to take further studies in Indonesia (Solomon, 2006).

Conclusion

The study concludes that there has been a dramatic decline in the Papua New Guinean press coverage of West Papua over the past 20 years. The contributing factors for the decline of press coverage are regional geopolitics and a general decline in professional standards of journalism in the PNG press.

More specifically, the cover of Papuan refugees in PNG has declined to a minimum and superficial level; direct sourcing of information has also declined as PNG press seems to rely heavily on international news agencies on covering the West Papua situation on both sides of the border; West Papuan voices have been reduced as the PNG press relies more heavily on official sources. This is seen as a general trend in the PNG media. In regard to geopolitical influence, PNG press cover of Papua depends on Australian media cover and on stories that affect mostly Australia directly on the Indonesian and West Papuan issues. There was not enough evidence to show that PNG press cover of West Papua is influenced by PNG’s relationship with Indonesia, however the growing importance PNG puts on its relationship with Indonesia can influence public perceptions.

While the West Papuan conflict remains unresolved, keeping it out of regular media reporting can only contribute to the deterioration of the situation as the frustration of West Papuans increases. With a conflict like this on its doorstep, PNG cannot keep turning a blind eye, especially because it hosts so many West Papuans. Increased in-depth reporting on this issue can help PNG citizens to better understand how West Papua is part of a complex relationship between Indonesia, Australia and Papua New Guinea.

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- Franz-Albert Joku, former editor of *The Times of Papua New Guinea*, interview with Patrick Matbob, Port Moresby, 31 April 2006.
- Harlene Joku, former journalist of *The Times*, interview with Patrick Matbob, Port Moresby, 31 April 2006
- Moses Werror, OPMRC chairman, interview with the authors, 9 May 2006.
- Daniel Menufandu, OPMRC members, interview with the authors, 9 May 2006.
- Peter Hamadi, OPMRC members, and interview with the authors, 9 May 2006.
- Reuben Hamadi, OPMRC members, interview with the authors, 9 May 2006.