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Mamberamo Madness

Progress and Resistance in West Papua

Do or Die

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In 1994, the Mission Aviation Fellowship person in charge of evangelism reported that fourteen tribes had never been contacted by the gospel and they had started working to 'evangelise' them. These are only the ones they have documented; there are many more.

The Mamberamo basin, in the part of the world violently and forcibly occupied by the state of Indonesia, runs through some of the most beautiful and diverse forest regions on Earth. A huge river system encompassing part of the central mountains of New Guinea, through lowlands and marshes to the coast, it covers an area over half the size of Britain. Its wild life includes crocodiles, tree kangaroos, cassowaries and birds of paradise, as well as many thousands of forest people, some of whom are still uncontacted by our culture.

Industrial Development

Unfortunately, there are some greedy outsiders who have their eyes on this beautiful place, and they are too powerful for the people there to defend against without help. As usual, civilisation is running out of things to consume and is looking to strip out the more remote regions hitherto left mostly unscathed. A new development project centres on a complex of hydro-electric dams, which will be used as the backbone of a whole bunch of heavy industry and agriculture.

A copper smelter, probably run by PT Freeport Indonesia, is planned to process ore from other areas invaded by Indonesia. This will in turn spawn by-products and downstream industries (no pun intended). For example, a nickel processing plant which can utilize the electric power, hydrogen and CO₂ available in Mamberamo for electrolysis, would use sulphuric acid, a by-product of the copper industry. The presence of the nickel industry in the area can in turn facilitate the development of a stainless steel industry. Iron ore from surrounding areas and perhaps Australia can be processed using the abundant electricity.

Hydro-electric Greenwash

The looniest idea of all is to use the electricity to split water into hydrogen and oxygen to make fuel for things like 'green' cars, proposed by fake green organisations. The hydrogen and oxygen are brought back together to make electricity and water, giving the illusion of a problem-free energy supply by moving the problem further away from the consumer. (Proponents of 'alternative energy' are not very good at saying where this energy will come from, preferring to make vague references to glorious future technologies that will arrive in time. If you want a good laugh, try and find out what zero point energy is - it's a good example of 'alternative energy' fantasies. The reality is projects like this one.)

While the upstream area will be used for dams, industrial agriculture and tree monocultures a few token 'protected' areas will provide jobs to buy off potential opposition from NGOs and Bellamy-esque environmentalists (not to mention eco tourism - oh, I just did). Industrial estates and new settlements downstream will need a massive support infrastructure too. 10,000 years of development will happen within a single decade, with roads, bridges, ports, industrial 'accidents' all the things we are familiar with in the developed world.

The mountainous region to the south of the Mamberamo basin is rich in minerals, including gold, copper, bauxite and nickel. A copper smelter in the project area would process copper from the infamous US/British owned Freeport mine. Power for smelting could also make the mining of other nickel deposits feasible, such as Gag, Waigo and the cyclops area. It's an economist's wet dream.

No Compromise!

This project must not be allowed to go ahead. Time after time we have seen the failure of lobbyists and compromise-brokers to achieve anything meaningful in terms of stopping development. Indeed they rarely challenge the idea of development itself, limiting themselves to negotiation over the distribution of the spoils of the projects.

The resistance in Mamberamo region is still strong and uncompromising, and we have an opportunity here to support a real and total fight against globalisation in its entirety. Local people with their tribal leaders are fighting in their own way against this project. However, they need moral support from you so that their voice and action becomes strong enough to stop it.

They are also working hard to come to various international arenas, like the UN conference, to present their regret and demands. They are aware of the danger, but no-one listens. They are hoping that the UN will contribute to stopping the project. Without our co-operation here in the West, attacking physically the governments and corporations involved, the people over there will be left with no choice but to ally themselves with the usual pathetic bunch of self-serving sycophants and wannabees who have sold out countless tribal resistance movements the world over. It isn't just a matter of physical survival, a culture is more than that. It is unreasonable to expect hunter-gatherers and pastoralists to learn our ways, or our legal systems, in order to stop us destroying them. A community with no concept of land ownership will be destroyed by this process. Their way is to fight. If more of us here in the west support them in their way, rather than trying to change them, they can win this battle. It's very easy to advocate non-violent resistance when you are not the one violence is being used against. People whose families are being decimated feel differently about it.

Development as a means of Control

The Mamberamo region is a major stronghold of the OPM. It is pretty much the last untouched roadless area where people can hide from the military and mount effective resistance operations. This is probably a very major consideration in Indonesia's decision to destroy it. The scale of this project is horrendous. It's worth repeating here that an area of wild land the size of the whole of the southern half of Britain will be completely wrecked. It's hard to imagine. If this goes we may as well kiss resistance goodbye.

The idea of destroying wild areas to quell opposition is not new. It has been done throughout history, for example in Scotland by the English to defeat the resisting Clans in the Great Wood of Caledon. In the book 'Desert Solitaire', Edward Abbey points out that the value of areas such as this "as a base for resistance to centralised domination is demonstrated by recent history. In Budapest and Santo Domingo for example, popular revolts were easily and quickly crushed because an urbanised environment gives the advantage to the power with the technological equipment. But in Cuba, Algeria and Vietnam the revolutionaries, operating in mountain, desert and jungle hinterlands with the active or tacit support of a thinly dispersed population, have been able to overcome or at least fight to a draw official establishment forces equipped with all of the terrible weapons of twentieth century militarism. Rural insurrections can then be suppressed only by bombing and burning villages and countryside so thoroughly that the mass of the population is forced to take refuge in cities, where the people are then policed and if necessary starved into submission."

The Dam Project

The notion of building large dams and industrial complexes in such a geologically unstable zone is extremely irresponsible, even within its own warped reasoning. In February 1996, the island of Biak was hit by an earthquake measuring 7.0 on the richter scale. Another, registering 4.6, struck Mamberamo and Jayapura in September 1997. Mamberamo is also being promoted as a future food supply centre of national importance, with possibly a million hectares set aside for rice cultivation to be irrigated from the dam scheme. Like a previous disastrous mega-project in Central Kalimantan, this is packaged as part of the strategy to salvage the country's self-sufficiency in rice.

Transmigration

There are plans to move about 300,000 people from the western ports of Indonesia to the area to provide the workforce for the agricultural projects. The village of Kasonaweja, capital of Central Mamberamo sub-district, will be the site of the shipping terminal, warehouses, offices and a trade centre. The Mamberamo development is part of the rush to develop the eastern part of the occupied areas and fill them with huge numbers of Indonesians to make it harder to justify claims for independence. The Indonesian state needs to be able to turn the natural wealth of the area into power to keep itself propped up over the coming years.

The occupying regime's attempts to impose a modern economy throughout the outer islands has brought poverty, social conflict and ecological damage, nowhere more so than in West Papua. The massive transmigration schemes plus logging, plantation and mining concessions have deprived local populations of their traditional land and thus destroyed their way of life.

Land Rights

Reports from the region state that the process of land appropriation has already begun, with the invaders using bribery, threats and trickery against the local people. The occupying president, Habibie, is due to announce this project in August this year. The whole project is shrouded in secrecy; information about who is involved is extremely hard to come by, though a DoD contact visited the region almost a year ago and said that some construction had already started, ahead of any permissions or approvals.

In 1997 the governor of Irian Jaya (that's what Indonesia calls West Papua) said his office would mobilise local people's support for the project. However, the majority have not been informed, let alone consulted about the mega-project plans. A representative of the people there went to the United Nations Indigenous People's Conference in Geneva in July this year, but was not permitted to speak by the white westerners running it.

Human rights

Six thousand people living near the river will be moved from their forest home to a new town, with the descent into squalour, alcoholism and prostitution that inevitably accompanies such forced relocations. In the soon-to-be-industrial zone, the seeds of a new shanty town are now being sown; accommodation for around 3,000 people is already under construction near the mouth of the Mamberamo river. In April 1997 an official seminar and workshop on the mega-project was attended by private companies from Germany, the Netherlands, France and Japan as well as Indonesia. In February this year Barnabas Suebu, a former governor of Irian Jaya, announced that Germany, Japan and Australia had agreed to invest in the project.

To our knowledge, no official announcements on foreign participation have ever been made. Watch Indonesia, the NGO that tracks German involvement, believes that bilateral discussions on the project are being kept deliberately low-key. A December 1997 meeting of the German Indonesian Forum (GIF), a group representing business interests in both countries, included an unpublicised workshop on Mamberamo. The participants included representatives from the companies Ferrosstahl and Siemens. The terms of reference show that German, and to a lesser extent, Australian funding will be used in conjunction with state funds for many of the feasibility studies. The basic preliminary studies are estimated to cost around 13 million DM. Three German companies have already invested about 100,000 DM each in these. Their activities are likely to be in the fields of hydro-electric (Siemens/ Hochtief), heavy industry (Ferrostaal) and infrastructure (Hochtief). No doubt many more snouts will appear at the trough as the plans progress.

Uncontacted Tribes

According to Indonesian government figures, some 7,000 people live in the area. Nobody really knows, since there are at least 14 uncontacted tribes*. As well as these, dozens of other tribes will be destroyed completely. The indigenous people live a semi-nomadic life - hunting, fishing and growing things. Until recently their main contact with outsiders had been with Indonesian Protestant Church missionaries (GKI) and the Indonesian military searching for Free Papua Movement guerillas (OPM). For many of them the first contact they have with our culture will be when they are forcibly removed from their lands - a nice way to say hello. Those who survive the relocation (many do not) face a life of misery in a squalid shanty town.