

## West Papua independence leaders declare 'government-in-waiting'

*Province's breakaway movement nominates exiled leader as interim president as conflict-ridden Indonesian region marks independence day*



*Benny Wenda has been nominated interim president of West Papua amid what the UN has called 'disturbing' violence in the region.*

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West Papuan leaders have declared a provisional “government-in-waiting” of the contested Indonesian province, as the United Nations said it was “disturbed by escalating violence” there, including the killing of a child allegedly by security forces.

The province marks independence day on 1 December, the anniversary of West Papua’s declaration of independence from Dutch colonial rule in 1961 and the raising of its now-banned Morning Star flag.

The Indonesian military took control of the province in 1962, and it has been subject to a fierce separatist struggle ever since.

The independence movement, the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP), has laid out a new constitution and nominated exiled leader Benny Wenda as its interim president.

“Today, we honour and recognise all our forefathers who fought and died for us by finally establishing a united government-in-waiting,” said Wenda, who is based in the UK.

“Embodying the spirit of the people of West Papua, we are ready to run our country.

“As laid out in our provisional constitution, a future Republic of West Papua will be the world’s first green state, and a beacon of human rights – the opposite of decades of bloody Indonesian colonisation. Today, we take another step towards our dream of a free, independent and liberated West Papua.”

Ahead of 1 December, often a date of significant unrest and violence, the spokeswoman for the UN human rights office, Ravina Shamdasani, said: “We are disturbed by escalating violence over the past weeks and months in the Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua and the increased risk of renewed tension and violence.”

Shamdasani said in one incident on 22 November, a 17-year-old was shot dead and another teenager injured in an alleged police shootout. The boy’s body was found at the Limbaga mountain in Gome district of West Papua.

She also cited the killing of church pastor Yeremia Zanambani, whose body was found near his Hitadipa district home riddled with bullets and stab wounds. Zanambani “may have been killed by members of the security forces”, Shamdasani said.

“Earlier, in September and October 2020 there was a disturbing series of killings of at least six individuals, including activists and church workers, as well as non-indigenous residents. At least two members of the security forces were also killed in clashes.”

Thirty-six demonstrators were arrested in Manokwari and Sorong in pro-independence protests at the weekend.

Indonesian-controlled Papua and West Papua form the western half of the island of New Guinea.

The people indigenous to the provinces are Melanesian, ethnically distinct from the rest of Indonesia and more closely linked to the people of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and New Caledonia.

The Dutch colony of Papua until 1961, the region was militarily annexed by Indonesia in 1962, and formally incorporated into the Indonesian republic following a UN-backed 1969 referendum called the Act of Free Choice. But the vote was widely condemned as fraudulent, with just over 1,000 selected Papuans forced, some threatened with violence, to vote in support of Indonesian rule.

Indonesia regards Papua and West Papua as integral and indivisible parts of the Indonesian state, and has consistently said it is working to develop the region.

Papua and West Papua are rich in natural resources – Papua’s Grasberg is one of the world’s largest gold mines – but are among the least developed provinces in Indonesia, with endemic poverty and high levels of childhood malnutrition.

Jakarta is currently trying to extend the “special autonomy” provisions that were first introduced to West Papua in 2001, ostensibly to give Papuans a greater share of revenue from their rich natural resources and greater political autonomy. Those provisions are set to expire at the end of the year.

Pro-independence protesters say the special autonomy law is being used to repress Papua’s independence movement, and are demanding a referendum on secession from Indonesia.