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Could the Papua Hostage Situation Have Been Prevented?

As the hostage-taking of New Zealand pilot Philip Mark Mehrtens enters its sixth consecutive month, his whereabouts in eastern Indonesia remain unknown.

By **Aprila Wayar**

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Credit: [Flickr/lussqueittt](#)

As Indonesian forces continue their manhunt for a New Zealand pilot taken hostage by Papuan resistance fighters in February, the chances of his peaceful release are growing slimmer – and the governments involved are slowly waking up to the reality that the warning signs were there, but were ignored.

The 37-year-old pilot, Philip Mark Mehrtens, a New Zealand citizen, was flying on behalf of a low-budget Indonesian airline, seeking to gain extra flight hours so that he could eventually graduate to a more prominent airline. But his life was plunged into danger on February 7, when he flew into the remote Paro airfield in Nduga regency of Papua province, and upon arrival was kidnapped by fighters of the West Papua Liberation Army (TPNPB) under the leadership of 24-year-old Egianus Kogoya.

The armed group, estimated to be approximately 500-strong, threatened to execute Mehrtens within two months if New Zealand's government did not facilitate negotiations for an independent Papua with the Indonesian authorities.

Indonesian security officials have responded to the hostage-taking with huge military deployments that have so far proved ineffective in the rugged terrain of the Papuan highlands region where Mehrtens is believed to be held.

The head of the Papua Regional Police Inspectorate, Gen. Mathius Fakhiri, said the process of freeing Mehrtens required a careful approach to avoid casualties.

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“Philip was often taken from place to place. This makes it difficult for officials to know exactly where Philip is,” he said in a recent interview. “Moreover, the terrain in Papua is very difficult.” Fakhiri said that the search is currently being carried out in four regencies: Nduga, Lanny Jaya, Jayawijaya, and Yahukimo.

These sorts of military operations continue to come at the cost of Papuan civilians, many of whom have protested the violent transfer of West Papua into the Indonesian Republic in the late 1960s. Repeated requests by New Zealand officials to help in rescue missions have so far been met with suspicion and defensiveness by Indonesian officials.

“We will handle it internally,” Mahfud Md, the coordinating minister for political, legal, and security affairs, said in a statement in May. “Our policy must not involve other countries and this is our internal affair and we can do it ourselves. No matter what the stakes are, it can’t enter the international arena.”

Vice President Ma’ruf Amin has told the Indonesian media that security authorities in Papua needed “to get tough” on “separatist rebels,” while at the same time instructing them

to continue protecting civilians in the restive region.

In April, a video was released by the TPNPB in which Mehrtens appeared, surrounded by Kogoya's fighters, and claimed that several aerial bombardments occurred in the area where he was held, pleading for restraint from the Indonesian military. In the same highlands region, violence between TPNPB and Indonesian forces has escalated since 2018, displacing an estimated 60,000 to 100,000 villagers. While the conflict boils on, these internal refugees remain in limbo, the victims of one of Asia's forgotten humanitarian crises.

Stalled Negotiations

In an attempt to resolve the hostage situation, peace negotiators from the Humanitarian Dialogue Centre, representatives of the New Zealand government, and leaders from the TPNPB met in top secret in Port Moresby in May. TPNPB spokesperson Sebbby Sambom, who was present at the meeting, claimed that the talks led to nothing concrete.

While TPNPB leaders have been inconsistent in their demands throughout the months, they have recently adopted a more balanced tone towards the fate of Mehrtens. More recent TPNPB demands gave New Zealand's government an ultimatum of two months to respond with dialogue in order to prevent Mehrtens' execution. They also stated they will not release more proof-of-life videos of Mehrtens. "We will not kill him, he will stay with us until West Papua is independent," Kogoya [reportedly said in July](#).

However, around this time, New Zealand journalist Johnny Blades, who has long covered the region, [made a personal plea](#) for the

immediate release of Mehrtens in a message to Kogoya via Sambom, expressing concern for the safety not just of the hostage but also of Papuan civilians in the area if the matter drags on longer. He also said that the hostage-taking could damage the Papuans' international reputation. Sambom voiced his personal support for Blades' call in an audio post on social media that went viral. However, Kogoya has not yet responded to the request, and it remains difficult to get a clear read on Kogoya and his intentions.

Asked about progress on domestic negotiations, Adriana Elizabeth, a researcher at the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) in Jakarta, claimed that negotiations hadn't progressed much due to the two sides' differences in positions, perceptions, and demands.

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"Negotiation requires communication skills," she told The Diplomat. "In the context of hostage release, negotiations only focus on the interests of rescuing hostages (non-violent approach). This is different from political negotiations regarding the political demands of the TPNPB. Troop deployment is not required in hostage negotiations. What is needed is a negotiating team trusted by the parties for the specific purpose of releasing hostages only."

Dutch journalist Rohan Radheya, who has previously worked inside Papua with armed elements within the Free Papua movement, said it was important to look at the conflict from both sides.

"I totally understand their concerns," he said. "Foreigners were warned as early as 2018 not to

venture there. Those pilots bring in transmigrants, personal apparatus, and supplies that they [the TPNPB] consider a threat to their cultural survival. The wounds run too deep.”

Radheya drew a parallel to the [Mapenduma hostage crisis](#) in early 1996, when 26 members of a [World Wildlife Fund](#) research mission [were taken hostage](#) by an armed TPNPB group led by former priest turned resistance leader Kelly Kwalik. The four-month hostage crisis was covered extensively in the international media, and shone a light on the broader human rights situation in the restive province. Multiple foreign governments assisted Jakarta with logistics and intelligence with some even participating in a rescue mission in May, which resulted in the death of two hostages. According to Radheya, the Mapenduma episode was bad publicity for the overall West Papuan cause. “This can very well end up the same way, a thorn in the flesh for decades and decades to come if he [Mehrtens] is eventually killed,” Radheya said.

“It’s unlikely that Mehrtens didn’t know what he was getting into or he was simply not properly briefed,” he added. “On the other hand, you cannot expect to take citizens from other countries and their governments to simply abide by your demands. No government would want to look like an easy bargain at gunpoint.”

One of the TPNPB’s motives for capturing Mehrtens was the training that New Zealand’s government once provided to Indonesian police in Papua. In 2009 and 2010, New Zealand provided community policing programs to civilians and Indonesian police officers in the region. In 2014, there were plans to extend the program and train another 1,000 police officers over three years in Papua at the cost of NZ \$5.5

million. The program was stopped for unknown reasons, but later replaced by a Dutch-funded initiative.

For its own part, the New Zealand government has been tight-lipped over Merhtens' plight. Prime Minister Chris Hipkins has called for his peaceful release, and condemned the use of hostages to make a political point. The government has in the past registered its concern with Jakarta about human rights abuses in Papua at the ministerial level, an issue which is not infrequently raised in the parliamentary debate by the country's Green Party. But Wellington has maintained a consistent support for Indonesian rule in Papua.

The hostage situation complicates efforts by New Zealand and 18 other countries that make up the Pacific Islands Forum to push for a visit to Papua by the United Nations Human Rights Council.

A War Crime?

The broader Free Papua Movement, which advocates a peaceful struggle for independence has not condoned the hostage taking.

While calling for Mehrtens' release, Benny Wenda, the leader of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP), said any decision on the hostage was [out of his hands](#), and insisted the situation was a result of Indonesia's unwillingness to allow the U.N. Human Rights Commissioner to visit Papua.

The sense that multiple players bear some responsibility for the situation has not escaped Indonesian human rights activist and lawyer Veronica Koman, who has done extensive work on West Papua. She said that there was a real

risk of Mehrtens being killed in the crossfire as Indonesian forces lead attempts to release him.

“I understand the despair of TPNPB because the international community has turned a blind eye to what is happening in West Papua, but still this hostage-taking cannot be justified,” she said. “But at the same time, I really regret the stubbornness of the Indonesian government in rejecting mediation assistance from the international community. Again, lives will be lost in West Papua due to the prestige of the state which does not want to negotiate with West Papua.” The conditions that created the hostage-taking were made possible because Indonesia downplayed the scale of the crisis in the region, Koman added.

“The U.N. estimated that up to 100,000 people are currently displaced due to armed conflict in West Papua,” she said. “The Indonesian Government and international community should understand and make clear that what is happening in West Papua is armed conflict, so civilians are aware of the risks.”

Early Warnings

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With this in mind, it is hardly plausible that the risks of flying into a conflict zone were totally unknown to Susi Air, the airline for which Mehrtens was flying at the time of his capture. Indeed, there were plenty of warning signs.

In March 2021, Indonesian state media reported that another New Zealand pilot in the employ of Susi Airlines, John Terrence Hellyer, landed on an airstrip in Puncak Jaya regency and was interrogated by 50 armed members of the TPNPB. The group objected to pilots flying

apparatus and personnel into the area. Hellyer was then released with a warning but his case was far from an isolated incident. The year before, the New Zealand national Graeme Thomas Wall was gunned down and killed in Timika during a raid by TPNPB fighters. In an interview about the killing with [Radio New Zealand Pacific](#), one of the TPNPB's representatives apologized but stated that the group had issued warnings since 2018 for foreigners to leave the area.

The signals kept coming, even after Mehrtens was taken hostage. In April of this year, a South African pilot for Susi Air was interrogated by TPNPB guards after landing in Puncak Jaya and was forced to leave the area with a Free West Papua petition in hand. Yudo Margono, the recently appointed commander of the Indonesian Armed Forces, claimed that he warned Susi Airlines multiple times not to fly into the region, as Indonesian agency Detik reported in February, shortly after the hostage-taking.

In a statement on March 1, Susi Air, which is owned by former Maritime Minister Susi Pudjiastuti and employs a large number of foreign pilots, claimed it had halted around half of its domestic flights inside Papua in response to Mehrtens' capture. However, the company continues to operate a number of flights to remote parts of Papua. The company did not reply to The Diplomat's request for comment.

An Ongoing Fight

Several confrontations to free Mehrtens have been met with heavy resistance by the TPNPB, leading to casualties on both sides. On April 17, reports emerged that members of the group had attacked 36 Indonesian soldiers at a post in

Nduga on April 15. At least [six soldiers were killed](#) and 21 others fled into the jungle. Nine soldiers were reportedly held captive by the resistance fighters. Military spokesperson Col. Taryaman confirmed that the soldiers were part of a group searching for Mehrtens and that Indonesian authorities were searching for about 30 missing soldiers.

Sebby Sambom stated that TPNPB fighters carried out the attack in retaliation for the killing of two rebels during a shootout with Indonesian security forces the month before. Sambom called on the Indonesian Government to halt its military operations in Papua in return for negotiations with the Indonesian and New Zealand governments, and claimed 13 Indonesian soldiers were killed in the engagement.

On April 18, army chief Yudo Margono confirmed the deaths of four Indonesian soldiers in the clash, and said that one was missing and five wounded. On the 23rd, the last missing soldier was confirmed dead. Then, at the beginning of July, Mahfud Md and the head of police in Papua announced that they had prepared 5 billion rupiah (around \$329,000) in order to pay a ransom to secure Mehrtens' release, claiming that Kogoya's group had demanded the money.

Two days later Kogoya rebuked the claim in a video release, saying he never asked for money but only for Papuan Independence. When asked about the distortion of information surrounding Mehrtens's capture, Adriana Elizabeth claimed it was because both sides had not been able to agree on a neutral negotiating team.

“Hostage taking occurs in the middle of an armed conflict but releasing hostages (even if

successful) does not automatically mean the conflict is over. As long as there is no negotiating team that is solid and accepted by both parties, various contradicting issues like this will continue to happen,” she said.

Toward a Solution?

Efforts are ongoing by church and community leaders in Papua to urge TPNPB people to encourage Kogoya to release Merhtens. However, Radheya said any room for sensible compromise on the matter of Mehrten’s release was complicated by divisions in the Papuan independence movement itself.

“There was a very recent initiative from players within the ULMWP and Jakarta to hold a dialogue in Geneva, but it failed because leaders of the TPNPB boycotted it. Making peace with one faction while the other faction keeps resisting is a hopeless effort in their eyes,” he said.

“That’s why Papuan unity is of utmost importance,” he added. “They have to unite to be able to broker some sort of conducive concession for Papua.”

In November 2011, at the height of a rising Papuan insurgency, the former administration of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono hosted several rounds of peace talks with armed OPM factions under the leadership of Dr. Farid Husein, who also brokered peace deals on behalf of Yudhoyono administration in Aceh with the rebel faction Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM). This eventually led to the Helsinki Agreement and ended a decades-long insurgency in the western region.

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While President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo has so far chosen a more aggressive approach than his predecessor towards Papuan independence aspirations, it remains to be seen whether he is willing to adopt a different approach before the end of his second and final term in office next year.

Indeed, with elections approaching in February, some have fears of an even harsher policy, given that Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto is among the favorites to win. A former general and ex-son-in-law of the dictator Suharto, Prabowo has been credibly accused of committing war crimes in East Timor and Aceh. He also led the four-month siege during the Mapenduma hostage incident in 1996, which led to several casualties on both sides.

Radheya referenced a popular song in Papuan independence circles, which contains the refrain, “One falls, a thousand rise up.” He said that this was a sign that the struggle would not fade away, and that the Indonesian government “should be willing to make concessions to break this endless cycle of violence before it’s too late.”

“Sending more troops is not going to stop the deep-rooted hatred towards Indonesian rule of Papuan generations to come,” Radheya said. “It will only add more gasoline to the fire for both sides. We should not forget that it was Kogoya’s predecessors, his father and elders, who started this guerrilla insurgency as a result of massive regional militarization at that time. Their assassinations were the main reason for him to pick up arms.”

While the clock is ticking for Mehrtens, both sides have to come to terms that there are no simple solutions for the decades-old conflict in Indonesia’s easternmost province. Only mutual

understanding and a sincere willingness to sit down and talk can produce a practical solution for Mehrtens' release – let alone a lasting peace.

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