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Why we are the dirty dog

Tim Lindsey and Jeremy Kingsley

INDONESIA has 1.2 billion reasons to stop Papua becoming the next East Timor.

That is how many US dollars in tax it collected from the massive and controversial Freeport gold and copper mine last year.

Freeport reportedly paid another $US26.6 million from 1998 to 2004 for often brutal police and military protection.

As with Aceh, Indonesia’s other restive but resources-rich province, Jakarta will not let a big earner like Papua go easily.

But the issue runs much deeper than the considerable incomes earned from Papua’s rich natural resources.

Papua has always been seen by non-Papuan Indonesians as integral to their nation.

History tells us why they feel so passionately about it.

Papua, like Aceh and the rest of Indonesia, was colonized for centuries by the Dutch, while Timor was ruled by Portugal.

The Indonesian revolution against the Dutch, beginning in 1945, was a bloody guerilla war that was settled in 1949 by a UN process.

Through that settlement, the new republic won most of the former colonial empire, but Papua was granted to the departing Dutch as a last toehold on the archipelago.

Indonesia always regarded this as invalid, consistently claiming to be entitled to the full extent of the former colonial state.

In 1962, Jakarta staged a limited armed invasion of the territory and a UN-sponsored and dodgy Act of Consultation saw Papua merged with the republic in 1963.

In the same year, President Soekarno spoke for most non-Papuan Indonesians when he said Indonesia was incomplete without the province he labelled West Irian.

Today, little has changed for non-Papuan Indonesians, most of whom feel determined there should not be another East Timor breakaway.

Their resolve has been strengthened by the recent resolution of the conflict in Aceh that has kept that province Indonesian.

It is therefore easy to understand why there is no support in government, or in the legislature in Jakarta, or among political parties, for independence for Papua and why the military has made its very aggressive opposition to the idea loudly heard.

This is why the Megawati government tried to split Papua into several provinces to weaken opposition and why the current government of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a former Megawati minister, seems determined to continue her policies.

His, despite Papuan anger and despite his promises to reach an Aceh-style settlement with separatists.

Jakarta’s anger over the grant of temporary protection visas to 42 of the 43 Papuans, who reached Cape York in an outrigger canoe, is therefore not surprising.

It is also far more serious than the juvenile dirty dogs cartoon squabble suggests.

Australia’s relations with Indonesia were as close as they have ever been, thanks to the warm personal relationship between Prime Minister Howard and President Yudhoyono.

And, of course, the much-appreciated Australian generosity after the Aceh and Nias disasters.

Despite this, most Indonesians still retain a deep cynicism about Australia’s deeper designs in the region.

Part of this reflects mistrust of perceived white neo-colonialism, inherited from a past under Dutch rule.

Part of it is drawn from the widely held, if quite wrong, view among many Indonesians that Australia unilaterally invaded Indonesian East Timor.

Another part of it reflects the even more widely held but, again, wrong view that Australia wanted an independent East Timor for strategic reasons.

Supposedly, it was to weaken Indonesia and create a buffer for Australia’s northern boundaries. An extension of this view is that Australia wants to see Papua playing a similar role.

The irony of the situation is that the break-up of the Indonesian archipelago is one of Canberra’s greatest nightmares.

Today, East Timor is a virtual failed state, propped up by international aid like other micro-states in our region.

Australia has won no real advantage from East Timor’s independence.

HE prospect of Indonesia fragmenting into dozens of East Timors with attendant civil wars, humanitarian catastrophes and refugees is therefore the sort of thing that keeps Australian foreign affairs ministers sleepless.

The rub is that when Canberra makes loud statements of support for Indonesian sovereignty in Papua, it really means it.

Unfortunately, our political leaders have very little prospect of convincing Indonesian legislators, or security forces, that they are sincere.

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Black Hawk down: some Indonesians fear Australia will “invade” Papua.