

INTERNATIONAL APPEAL

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SPACEPORT GENOCIDE

In the western Pacific Ocean between Australia and the equator lies one of the most isolated, least visited places on earth. The second largest island in the world, it is still inhabited by traditional tribal peoples speaking hundreds of different languages. Although geographically and culturally it is a single land, this tropical paradise was divided in 1848 into a western and an eastern half by a line drawn down the middle in an agreement between the Netherlands and Great Britain. They regarded the black people who lived there only as a potential source of cheap labor for the extraction of resources from their land. Among the wealth on and beneath the island of New Guinea are timber, oil, gas, and minerals, including silver and nickel and the largest deposits of gold and copper in the world.

The eastern half of the island, known as Papua New Guinea, has been independent since 1975 and is struggling to overcome its violent colonial history. The western half, known as West Papua, declared its independence when the Dutch colonial administration withdrew in 1961, but Indonesia, coveting its vast natural resources, invaded and formally absorbed West Papua into Indonesia in 1969. Since that time, Indonesia has engaged in continuous genocide against the indigenous population, which number about 2,000,000 people today. Over 500,000 have been killed, and thousands more have been raped, tortured and imprisoned by the Indonesian military.

As Paul Antonopoulos and Drew Cottle wrote in their heart-rending August 2019 article, [Forgotten Genocide in Indonesia](#), “The primary reason for Jakarta not granting self-determination to the indigenous people of West Papua is because of

the billions of dollars' worth of natural resources. Although Papuans have been struggling for independence for over half a century, Indonesia through its military has been bolstering its global economic relevance by exploiting the territory's vast reserves of natural resources that make their way to markets in the US, Canada, Europe, China and Australia, where the majority of mining companies are based."

Elon Musk's SpaceX is about to play a role in perpetuating this genocide.

The small island of Biak, off of West Papua's northern coast, just one degree south of the equator, looks like this today:



If Elon Musk has his way, it will soon look like this:



Indonesia would like to convert Biak into a lucrative “Space Island.” In December 2020, Indonesia offered the use of part of the island to SpaceX as a spaceport for launching satellites. SpaceX would like to launch and maintain as many as 42,000 satellites in order to provide high-speed wireless Internet everywhere on earth. This would require almost daily rocket launches forever into the future. Until now, SpaceX has been launching its satellites from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida, where the above photograph was taken. The spaceport at Cape Canaveral is surrounded by a wildlife refuge and has already done a lot of environmental damage.

“This spaceport,” said tribal chief Manfun Sroyer of plans for the island of Biak, “will cost us our traditional hunting grounds, damaging the nature our way of life depends on. But, if we protest, we’ll be arrested immediately.”

Biak’s location holds several attractions for SpaceX. Its location at the equator is ideal for launching satellites because less fuel is needed for them to reach orbit from there. And the vast reserves of copper and nickel on West Papua would supply some of the materials. Copper and nickel are two of the metals used in building rockets.

Indonesia has also offered Biak Island to the Russian space agency Roscosmos, which plans to develop its own spaceport on the island by 2024. Russia is planning its own fleet of 640 satellites, also to provide wireless Internet everywhere on earth.

The environmental effects of mining in West Papua are well-documented. “From the Grasberg mine,” wrote Antonopoulos and Cottle, “one of the biggest copper and gold mines in the world, hundreds of thousands of tonnes of tailings contaminate the vital Ajkwa delta system every day, destroying the environment which the Kamoro tribe relies upon for food and trade. So devastating to the environment is the Grasberg mine that apart from the 80 million tonnes of waste debris which it dumps into the Ajkwa river system every year, the open cut mine can be seen clearly from space.” What was formerly the top of a glacier-covered mountain is now a mile-wide crater one-third of a mile deep.

The open cut operations were finally closed in 2020, but the underground mining operations at Grasberg are expanding, and the contamination of rivers, forests, fisheries, and coastal waters, as well as the destruction of tribal communities, continues unabated. A 2012 report from Earthworks and MiningWatch Canada stated that mine waste from Grasberg had “buried over 166 square kilometres of

formerly productive forest and wetlands, and fish have largely disappeared.” The poisoned river is no longer a source of drinking water for the area’s villages.

West Papua’s mines will also be used to build Tesla’s electric vehicles (EVs), if Musk has his way. Nickel and copper are also needed for the long-range batteries used in EVs. Musk told Indonesian officials last July that Tesla would offer a “giant contract for a long period of time if you mine nickel efficiently and in an environmentally sensitive way.”

Musk and the government of Indonesia may come to an agreement as to what “environmentally sensitive” means, but West Papua’s native population may beg to disagree. It still means pulverizing and processing billions of pounds of rock, and depositing all the resulting tailings *somewhere*. In West Papua somewhere means virgin rainforest, pristine rivers and tribal lands.

Roads, Electricity and Cell Phones

In Papua New Guinea, the independent state to the east, most of the vast interior still has no roads or electricity -- or cell towers. And that was still the case only 5 years ago in West Papua too. But in the last few years, all of that infrastructure -- electricity to every village, a modern highway system bulldozed through the wilderness, and widely available cell phone service -- has been built by Indonesia and it has not been for the benefit of the native population, who do not want it and are gunned down or bombed if they protest.

Journalist David Robie calls the 4,325-kilometer Trans-Papua Highway “[West Papua’s highway of blood](#).” According to John Martinkus, whose moving book, *The Road: Uprising in West Papua*, was published last May, the highway brings military occupation, more mining and timber cutting by foreign corporations, environmental destruction, and replacement of native villages by settlements of Indonesian immigrants.

“On December 1, 2018,” writes Robie, “a ceremony marking the declaration of independence from the Dutch in 1961 by raising the *Morning Star* flag of a free Papua -- as Papuans do every year -- ended in bloodshed.” Every previous year, at least in the remote Nduga region, this ceremony had taken place peacefully and been ignored by Indonesians. But this year, road workers and soldiers came into Nduga on the new highway and took photos and videos of the crowd on their cell

phones. The resulting conflict left 19 road workers and a soldier dead. Since then, reprisal raids by the Indonesian military have forced some 50,000 people to flee their villages and become refugees. Two thousand soldiers, helicopters, and 650 commandos are involved in “protecting the highway.”

“It is the helicopters that are the worst,” writes Martinkus. “They are used as platforms to shoot or drop white phosphorous grenades or bomblets that inflict horrible injuries on the populace.”



Thomas Klasibin stands in front of what used to be the forest that supported him. Photo by James Morgan

And the spaceport, as Manfun Sroyer said, will perpetuate both the environmental damage and the continuing genocide. Aside from the noise, light, and vibrations accompanying rocket launches, all of the proliferating spaceports around the world are destroying their environment.

A Falcon 9 rocket -- the rocket SpaceX uses to launch its satellites -- consumes an incredible 3,200 pounds of fuel per second at full thrust. Unlike rockets that burn solid fuels, the Falcon 9 burns kerosene and doesn't pollute the land and water surrounding the spaceport with heavy metals. But that is assuming the launch is successful. Every time a rocket crash lands or explodes, the damage is tremendous. When two rockets crash landed during test launches at a remote spaceport on Alaska's Kodiak Island, 230 tons of soil were contaminated. And crashes happen

regularly at every spaceport. A [2013 study of rocket launch crashes](#) by Russian and Belgian space scientists found that rockets had been crashing, consistently since 1975, between 4% and 10% of the time at every spaceport in the world.

What is occurring on West Papua is possibly the worst genocide that is going on in the world today, and it is scarcely being reported. But it is not just genocide. It is a collision -- a collision between life and technology, a collision that stares us in the face everywhere we go, and it is not being reported because no one wants to look at it. "The people of West Papua are fighting with their lives every day to defend our forests, mountains and rivers," says West Papuan independence leader Benny Wenda. "We are ground zero in the fight to protect our global natural environment."

West Papua is the last place on earth where "primitive" human beings dare to say no to highways and electricity. The Trans-Amazon Highway was completed in 1975. The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan was fully electrified by 2010. The Old Order Amish are using cell phones today. In the year 2021, when humanity is preparing to colonize Mars, there is no place in most people's conception of reality for the existence of human beings who are part of the natural world. To acknowledge their existence would require us to face the contradiction between life and technology. Between reality and fantasy.

But the Papuans are there. And they are important.

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