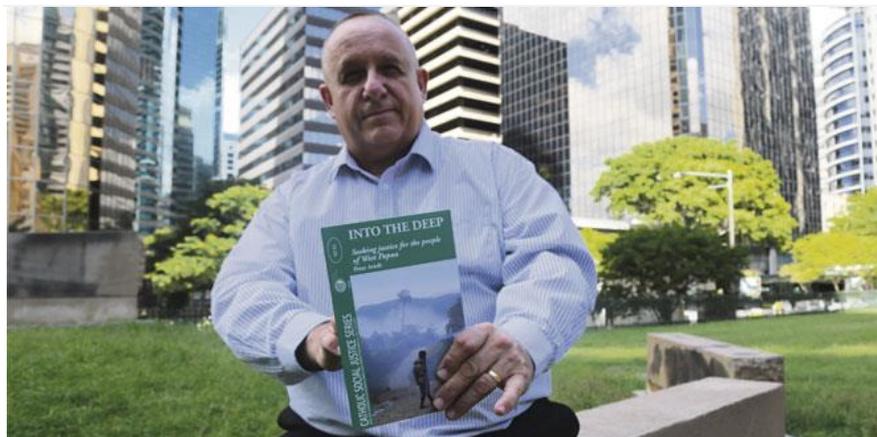


# New paper highlights stories of pain, humiliation, fear of West Papuans

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By Mark Bowling



Plea for help: Catholic social justice advocate Peter Arndt has delved into stories of pain, humiliation and fear that have indelibly marked generations of indigenous West Papuans and hardened their resolve for freedom and independence. Photo: Mark Bowling

THREE years ago, Catholic social justice advocate Peter Arndt joined an international Christian pilgrimage to West Papua and heard an impassioned plea from the survivor of an alleged Indonesian military massacre.

“I now realise that it was the moment when I began to enter into a deep solidarity with the people of West Papua and to understand the radical implications of Christian solidarity,” Mr Arndt, the executive director of Brisbane Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, said.

A young Papuan named Laurens told his story to Mr Arndt, quietly recounting horrific events he witnessed on the island of Biak on July 6, 1998.

According to Laurens, scores of Papuans were rounded up, forced onto navy boats, raped, mutilated, killed and dumped into the sea.

In the following weeks, more than 30 decomposed bodies were fished out of the sea or washed ashore.

Indonesian authorities claimed the bodies were those of victims of a recent tsunami that struck Papua New Guinea, but the corpses were dressed in clothes that clearly identified them as people from Biak island.

Laurens reached out to Mr Arndt with a simple plea: “Can you please help us to get our freedom?”

Mr Arndt has made several visits to West Papua, including a 2016 fact-finding mission after which he reported “there is clear evidence of ongoing violence, intimidation and harassment by the Indonesian security forces”.

However, in a new paper in the Catholic Social Justice series entitled *Into the Deep*, Mr Arndt delves into stories of pain, humiliation and fear that have indelibly marked generations of indigenous West Papuans and hardened their resolve for freedom and independence.

He searches to place events in the context of the message of the Gospel and Catholic social teaching. To this day, no Indonesian soldier or police officer has been held accountable for the dreadful deeds committed on Biak, Mr Arndt wrote.

He said those who continued to speak out, like Laurens, were deprived of employment opportunities and pensions, and subject to harassment and intimidation by Indonesian security officers.

“While we were listening to their stories, our meeting was raided by a contingent of police, intelligence officers and immigration officials,” Mr Arndt wrote.

“It was as if our local hosts had prepared an experience of what they face routinely at the hands of Indonesian authorities.

“It appears that one of our drivers had tipped the officials off to our presence on Biak and they had come to arrest us and question us about the purpose of our visit.”

Into the Deep also recounts Mr Arndt’s 2015 visit to the West Papuan highlands, to a village, which had witnessed military shootings just two months earlier.

Trouble started when soldiers caught a 12-year-old girl and beat her with their rifle butts.

After hundreds of people gathered near a police station to express their anger, shots were fired from a nearby airfield tower and four youths were killed.

“Both in the village and in church gatherings we attended during our four-day stay, it was apparent that the local community was still gripped by a mixture of shock and fear,” Mr Arndt wrote.

“Our presence as foreigners was, more than once, a cause of tension – some openly criticised those who welcomed us because they feared it would bring the authorities into the village or to the meetings we attended.

“Indeed, on our last full day in the village, word had spread to the village that the police were on their way to find out what we foreigners were doing.”

When Mr Arndt returned to the highlands a year later, the case was still being investigated by Indonesia’s national human rights commission, Komnas Ham, and no one had been held accountable for the fatal shooting of the four youths.

“That remains the case to this day, despite repeated assurances by the Indonesian Government that resolving the case is a high priority,” Mr Arndt wrote.

“The families have steadfastly refused to take blood money for the death of their boys.

“When I asked them what they want if there is to be justice for their boys, one of the fathers spoke for them all in a clear and solemn voice: ‘The only justice we want is freedom’.

“It was as if Laurens was speaking again, this time in the highlands, but to me it was also the voice of the crucified Christ.”

Mr Arndt said many Australians were seeking to support the people of West Papua, but balked at any form of support for a political objective.

“They hesitate when it comes to dedicating energy and resources to ending the Indonesian occupation and achieving political independence for West Papua,” he wrote.

“I have heard people of good will who say that they cannot be involved in political action and so restrict themselves to human rights advocacy.

“Some advise Papuans that self-determination is an impossible dream and that lesser goals should be sought.”

Into the Deep offers a detailed history of West Papua from colonial Dutch rule to Indonesian takeover. It is almost five decades since a rigged United Nations referendum, which legitimised Indonesia’s tenuous claim on West Papua.

Since then the history of political struggle against a brutal Indonesian rule has occasionally penetrated mainstream media reporting, but has seldom caused a ripple in Canberra.

Parramatta bishop and chairman of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council Bishop Vincent Long has offered a glowing endorsement of Mr Arndt’s Into the Deep.

“That deep reflection on Gospel values and Church teaching is what makes this publication so inspiring,” Bishop Long said.

“Peter places his friends’ experience in the context of the Scriptures and looks deeply into the Church’s teachings on justice and asks what he must do.

“He discerns the answer with clarity and courage.”

Into the Deep – seeking justice for the people of West Papua is available by online download from <http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au/publications/series-papers>