

Indonesian Military Target for Church Leaders in West Papua; Serious Problem for the growth of Christian Church

Indonesian Military Targeting Christian Pastors is a trend in West Papua since the death of Father Neles Tebay in 2019 through food poisoning. Christian Churches are losing more pastors and priests under the hands of Indonesian military who are mostly Muslim extremists. Pastors and Priests are prime targets of TNI and Indonesian intelligence in West Papua a trend that is dangerous for the growth and continuity of the Christian faith in West Papua. Churches in the Melanesian countries and the Pacific need to raise their voices higher this time because shepherds are dying leaving their sheep behind to be forced to follow their own ways.

Below is the list of Pastors who died in West Papua under the hands of Indonesian intelligence and military since 2018;

1. Father Neles Tebay a Senior Catholic Priests and Director for Papua Peace Network died of food poisoning in Jakarta in 2019
2. Pastor Gemin Nirigi Short and buried by Indonesian Military in December 2018
3. Pastor Alfred Degei of GKI Church Murdered in cold blod on 22nd of September 2020 died while out looking for pigs food
4. Pastor Yeremias Zanambani of GKI Church shot by TNI on 20th of September 2020.

Many Church Leaders are under the target of Indonesian military and police and their intelligence network. This has been a norm since Indonesia annexed the region 59 years ago. Pacific countries and the Christians in general cannot stay silent on this well-planned execution of Church leaders in West Papua Christian churches need to do something.

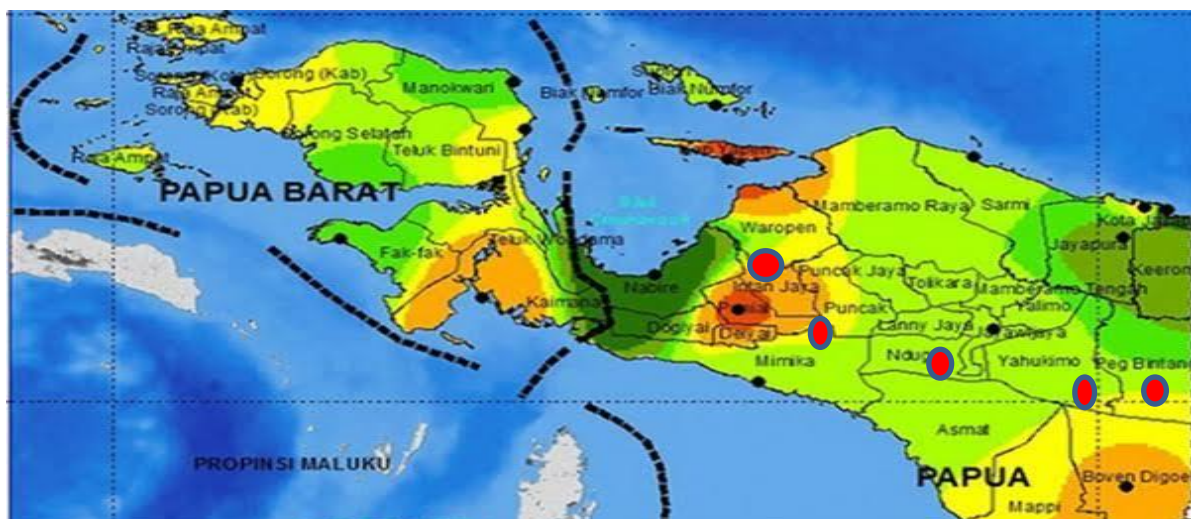


Fig. #1: Map of West Papua showing the existing armed conflict between Indonesian military and West Papua National Liberation Army shown by the red dots. ●

The Case of Pastor Zanambani

Hitadipa is a district in Intan Jaya regency located to the West of Nduga regency and North-west of the giant Freeport Mine in Mimika regency.

Pastor Yeremias Zanambani is his full name; he was a senior Pastor of the GKI Church, Bible translator and Head Master of the local Seminary when he was killed.

Chronology

Pastor Zanambani and his wife Miriam lives in the Hitadipa station while they have their piggery on the other side of the river about 300 meters walk. Before the incident, there was a military build-up in the area due to armed conflict between the West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB OPM) and the Indonesian military. The Indonesian military at the time was setting up a temporary base near their piggery while fighting with the TPNPB.

On the afternoon of 20th September 2020, Pastor Zanambani and his wife went to their piggery on the other side of the river as usual for feeding. On their way they met members of the Indonesian military who interrogated them accusing them of taking the food to feed the TPNPB members, they even followed them to their piggery and watched while they fed their pigs.

The Indonesian military left after that so Miriam told her husband that they should leave the area because it was getting late. However, Pastor told his wife to go home and prepare dinner for the family. He remained in the piggery to cook breakfast for the pigs. Miriam went home around 5: 00 pm and shortly after 30 minutes or so heard gun shots from the piggery. She alerted the Pastors that her husband and the old people at the piggery are in danger so they should visit them once, however, Pastors did not want to go out of fear. Miriam went back to the piggery around 6: 00 pm and saw her husband was shot on his side including breaking his arm. Pastor was alive at the time so he told her that the Indonesian military shot him.

She returned home while two old people slept with him in the piggery. He passed away in the mid night on the 20th of September 2020. On the next day, the Indonesian military (TNI) allowed only five Pastors to collect his body and buried it without proper mourning as per Melanesian tradition. Melanesians were known for mourning longer days for the death of their ‘big man’, and this was one of those big man in the area but was forced to bury on the same day Sunday 21st of September 2020.



Fig.#2. Pastor Zanambani's body after the shooting



Fig.#3. Pastors Carrying Pastor Zanambani's body to Hitadipa station

Hitadipa district in the Intan Jaya regency is currently experiencing one of the worse humanitarian crises after the murder of Pastor Yeremias Zanambani who was also the translator of Bible to local Moni dialect and Head Master of the local Theology school. He was shot by Indonesian military suspecting him of being a member of the West Papua National Liberation Army. After the shooting the Indonesian military only allowed five pastors to bury his body on the next day without proper funeral.

The villagers were ordered to leave their villages the next day emptying 6 churches, local community school and left for nearby villages or into the jungles. Some thousands of people currently displaced in Hitadipa, regency. The government is still not saying anything about the incident and is very slow to send independent investigation team into the area to verify the information coming out of the area.

Case of Pastor Alfred Degei

On the 22nd of September Pastor Alfred in Nabire went out of the house in the morning informing his family that he would go to look for pigs food at around 2: 00 pm. Since the Pastor did not return early as promised so his son went out to look for him that afternoon. The son searched for the father around the known locations but could not find him. He went to a place a certain police officer was interviewing the people showing them the dead body of his father if they could identify the body.

Son went there and saw that the dead body was his father's body; he was told by the police that the dead body was found dead at the back of the local Catholic Church. The son could not believe because Pastor Alfred was healthy that morning when went out of the house. On his body they saw bleeding from his nostrils and mouth and signs of heavy beating on the head. He was murdered in cold blood by somebody. The Police officer that was there was also questionable given the circumstances. The family is still in a state of shock on the sudden death of their father.



Fig.#4. Pastor Alfred Degei's Body

General Situation of Armed Conflict and Internally Displaced People

Armed Conflict is ongoing in Intan Jaya, Mimika, Nduga, Yahukimo and Pegunungan Bintang near the border between Papua New Guinea. There are thousands of Indonesian military and police sent to the area under the military operation since 2018 and they are still engage in the area.

In Intan Jaya, Hitadipa district is empty. There are six churches, a community school and an aid post that were emptied of people. The order to empty the district came from two sides; Indonesian military and West Papua National Liberation Army. People have moved out of the villages surrounding Hitadipa station into the jungles and nearby villages.

There has not been any humanitarian assistance team sent by the government into the area to monitor the situation and peoples' condition is unknown at the moment. Nduga IDPs are still at large for the last two years since 2018. A girl passed away in Wamena IDP settlement on the 26th of September 2020 add to the tally of the people of Nduga who died in displacement.

The government is still arguing over who killed the Pastor even though the immediate family and the relatives have already testified that TNI shot Pastor Yeremias Zanambani. The West Papua National Liberation Army are not strangers, they know who is who in the area and they will not likely to kill the Pastor someone they highly respect as a God's Servant. Killing of civilians in the conflict zones has been a normal routine for TNI and Police who have so far short more than 50 people since 2018 when the armed conflict started.



Fig.#5. Old people seen fleeing from the conflict zones in Intan Jaya regency



Fig.#6. Internally Displaced Kids in one of the Settlement in Intan Jaya regency

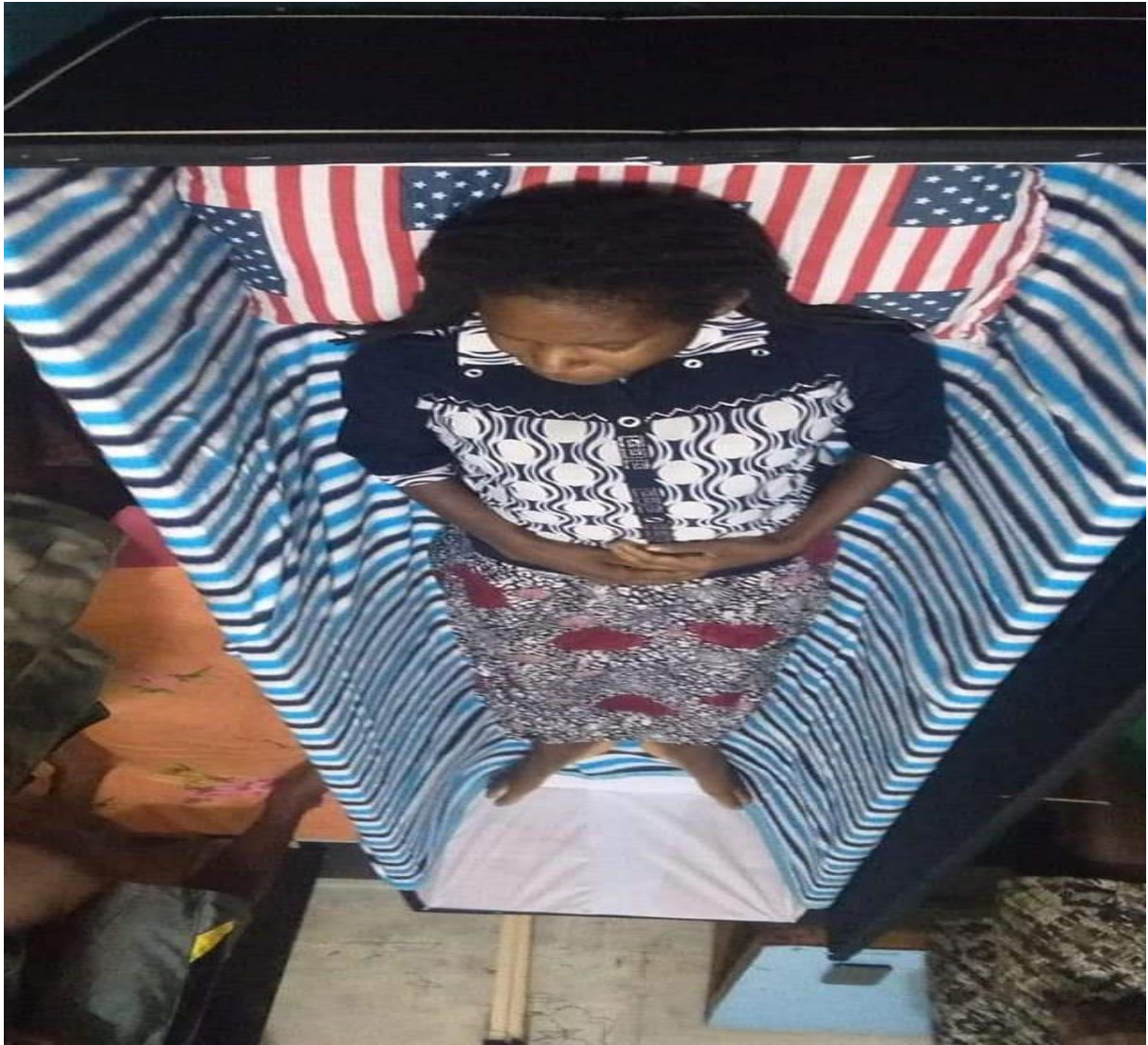


Fig.#7. A girl from Nduga died due to sickness in the IDP camps in Wamena on the 26th of September 2020. She is buried on Sunday 27th of September 2020.