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## West Papua New Guinea: Interview With Foreign Minister BEN TANGGAHMA

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BY Shawna Maglangbayan and Carlos Moore in Dakar on February 16, 1976.

*"Africa is our motherland. All of the Black populations which settled in Asia over the hundreds of thousands of years came undoubtedly from the African continent. In fact, the entire world was populated from Africa. Hence, we the Blacks in Asia and the Pacific today descend from proto-African peoples. We were linked to Africa in the Past. We are linked to Africa in the future. We are what you might call the Black Asian Diaspora."*

--Foreign Minister Ben Tanggahma



Ben Tanggahma (kiri) bersalaman dengan Walter Lini, bapak bangsa Vanutu di Vanuatu 1982

Question: Minister, in the past few months the major world's news media have reported large-scale fighting going on in the Southeast Asia-Pacific region between the Republic of Indonesia on the one hand, and on the other, the guerilla forces of the Democratic Government of West Papua New Guinea.

Answer: Yes, but the press fails to inform people about the fact that these are struggles in which poor, disinherited Black populations--both in East Timor and West Papua New Guinea--are fighting against a yellow supremacist, racist, expansionist, colonialist and fascist empire: the Republic of Indonesia.

Question: It is a fact that even in the United States, where people are supposedly in possession of the greatest amount of information about what is going on in the

world, there is great ignorance about your struggles. And certainly it was only recently that most people in the U.S.A. were informed even that Black peoples were living in those areas of Asia.

Answer: Yes, that is true. Nevertheless Black peoples have been inhabiting all regions of Asia for many thousands of years. In fact, the aboriginal populations of Southern China and the entire Southeast Asia (the Philippines, Kampuchea, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Burma, Thailand and Indonesia) were Black. Black populations are still in the jungle areas of those nations even today, though living as marginal peoples and facing many hardships in most cases.

Question: The Black peoples of the islands of New Guinea and Timor, who are now fighting the Indonesians, are therefore part of that great belt of aboriginal Black populations that settled in Asia?

Answer: Yes. We on the island of New Guinea and on the island of Timor belong to what is known as Melanesia, or Black Islands, if we translate it literally.

Question: Before getting in the political particulars of your struggle, let us address

ourselves again to historical facts, considering our general ignorance on the subject. What is your relationship toward Africa and Africans?

Answer: Africa is our motherland. All of the Black populations which settled in Asia over the hundreds of thousands of years came undoubtedly from the African continent. In fact, the entire world was populated from Africa. Hence, we the Blacks in Asia and the Pacific today descend from proto-African peoples. We were linked to Africa in the Past. We are linked to Africa in the future. We are what you might call the Black Asian Diaspora.

Question: Still on the subject of history, at what period in history did Black populations arrive on the islands of New Guinea?

Answer: I can only go by what modern anthropologists say, since we ourselves have never conducted any scientific research on the subject because of the conditions imposed by the Dutch colonization, British colonization, German colonization, Australian colonization, Japanese colonization, and, now Indonesian colonization. But according to anthropologists, different types of Blacks began arriving on the island of New Guinea and Australia at a date variously situated between 30,000 and 60,000 years ago.

Question: You have mentioned six colonial nations. Has the island of New Guinea been colonized by all of these nations?

Answer: Just a glance at contemporary history will show that the island of New Guinea and its peoples have been the most colonized territory on the planet. Let me give you an idea. In 1512, Portuguese adventurers began circling the island like vultures. Soon after they seized the island of Timor and colonized it until 1975. The Spanish joined a few years later, in 1528, and eventually seized the Philippines, then inhabited by Blacks. In 1545, Spain made a claim over our island and called it "Nueva Guinea" (New Guinea) because the peoples they met there bore a striking resemblance to the Blacks they were then coming into contact with on the Guinea Coast in West Africa. In 1600 the Dutch entered the area and starting pushing out both Portuguese and Spanish. In 1688 the British got in there and began rivaling with Holland. In 1788, the French jumped in too and laid claim to the Bougainville Islands. In 1834, Holland and Britain agreed to split the island amongst themselves in two equal halves and to oppose the intrusion of any third party. In 1883 the first massive deportation of Papuan slaves took place towards the sugar plantations of Queensland, Australia, then a British colony. (In fact, the deportation of Black slaves; or 'blackbirding,' had begun in 1845). In 1871, the Russian Empire of the Czar got into the picture, and was sending warships to New Guinea trying to secure part of the island for itself. Britain and Holland thwarted the Russian attempt. The same was true for Italy, which tried to gain a foothold on the Island in 1876. Italy and Czarist Russia were left out of the picture, since neither was strong enough to face the British and Dutch navies together. Only Germany was then in a position to do so. The French were pushed further to the East into New Hebrides, New Caledonia, Wallis Island, where they are still today. But Germany imposed its will during the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) at which time the African continent was dismembered, and alongwith Togo, Cameroons, Namibia and Tanzania, the Kaiser got a piece of the island of New Guinea. Hence, in 1834, the German flag was raised over Northeastern New Guinea. By 1888, therefore, the eastern half of our island was called northern "German New Guinea" and southern "British New Guinea," while the entire western half was called western "Dutch New Guinea." Italy, France, Spain, Russia and Portugal simply licked their wounds and took whatever they were given in Africa.

Question: That is certainly an amazing and unknown account of colonization in that side of the world.



Ben Taggahma bersama Prime Minister of Solomon Island, M. Mamaloni and his advisor, Mr. Kingmele.

Pacific 1982

Answer: The story is not over yet. By the end of the 1880's, the natural and human resources of the island were being exploited mercilessly; the slave trade to the sugar plantations of Queensland, Australia, the extraction of gold, the exportation of coconut oil; and from 1808 onwards, copper and rubber were being exported.

Meanwhile, white migrants from Germany, Australia and Holland had seized and carved up amongst themselves the best and richest lands of the island pushing back deeper and deeper into the jungles the original occupiers of these lands. This brought about an interminable cycle of war, raids, counter-raids, so-called punitive expeditions and so on. No historian has yet attempted a detailed account of the number of Blacks killed or taken into slavery on the island from the 16th century onwards. By the end of the 19th century, compulsory labor, that is practically slave labor, was in force throughout the island. Then, in 1902, Australia became independent of Britain and concluded an agreement with London whereby "British Papua New Guinea" was ceded to Canberra. The British pulled out of Northeastern New Guinea and it became "Australian Papua New Guinea" in 1906. At about the same period the Boers of South Africa proclaimed their Independence, too, and took over the British colonies which today make up South Africa. But in 1919, generalized warfare broke out amongst the different European nations against Germany. Australia, which had declared war on Germany alongside Britain, invaded "German New Guinea" to the North, and took it over. That was during World War I. Less than thirty years after, World War II broke out with Japan fighting alongside Germany. In 1942 Japan invaded the island of New Guinea kicking out both the Australians, who held the eastern half, and the Dutch, who held the western half. Imperial Japan occupied our island until 1945, exploiting the resources, imposing another form of forced labor and continuing the colonial policies of the Europeans. In 1945, the U.S. got into the picture. American troops, a lot of them Blacks, invaded the islands and fought some of the bloodiest battles in the Pacific area against the Japanese. After giving back the West to the Dutch and the East to the Australians, American troops pulled out in 1948. In 1962, the Indonesians invaded "Dutch New Guinea", kicked out the Dutch and annexed the western half where we are presently fighting. Australia held on to Eastern Papua New Guinea until September 18, 1975, when the eastern half of our island became independent under Prime Minister Michael Somare.

Question: No doubt, the situation you have described is more complicated than any of the cases we have studied in Africa or elsewhere. Minister, when exactly and how did the armed struggle begin in the western half of the island, or West Papua New Guinea?

Answer: Well, first of all, when the Indonesians invaded in January 1962, our people were caught unawares. We were on the road to Independence then. The Dutch had already accepted the idea of independence and had agreed to open discussions around a target date. The date proposed was 1970. Our first elected parliament, or National Council, had just been elected and half-a-dozen nationalist political parties were campaigning for Independence. That is why Indonesia, then ruled by Ahmed Sukarno, decided not to waste the time and launched a military invasion. In fact, Indonesia had been claiming West Papua New Guinea as part of her territory since she had become Independent of the Dutch in 1949. The U.S. stepped in to stop the fighting between Indonesian and Dutch troops, and an agreement was signed between both nations, totally behind the backs of our people, which handed over West Papua New Guinea to Indonesia with the proviso that a referendum be effected in 1969 to determine whether our people wanted to be part of Indonesia or independent. That was called "The New York Agreement," and was signed at the United Nations in August 1962.

Holland pulled out its civilian administration, thus ending 140 years of colonial rule. Indonesia's colonial reign of terror began.

Question: When exactly did the Blacks of West Papua New Guinea react to Indonesian occupation?

Answer: Practically immediately after the Dutch pulled out in 1969.

Question: How did the Indonesians react to the launching of the armed struggle?

Answer: That is an important question because the struggle was launched the same year a coup d'etat took place in Indonesia, in which one million Indonesian communists were killed. Hence, at the same time that Sukarno was being eased out of power, our people were battling Sukarno's troops in West Papua New Guinea. Large-scale repression had begun, and in a matter of months after our first attacks against Indonesian barracks and police posts in February 1976, a total of 35,000 West Papuans had been killed by air strikes, bombings or the assaults of Indonesian troops against rebelling tribes and villages. So it made no difference for us, in terms of repression, whether Sukarno was in power or not.

Question: Was it really grassroots leadership that launched the resistance movement in February 1965?

Answer: There can be doubt. This is proven by the fact that although Johan Ariks, the initiator of the struggle, was captured and killed in prison by the Indonesians; or that Lodewik Mandatjan and Col. Freddy Awon were to be eventually captured and killed by the Indonesians, the struggle not only continued, but widened to cover areas where there had been no military activity.

Question: You referred to the existence of a slave trade from New Guinea to Australia. Also, you quoted from a book in which mention was made of Malay and Arab slave traders. Could you elaborate?

Answer: Yes. These are facts relatively unknown to any but ourselves and certain historians. But the existence of a widespread slave trade of Papuans in the Middle and Far East, and as far as Turkey and Russia, is attested to by medieval chronicles. From the 12th and 13th centuries onwards, the expanding Arab Empire had spread its influence to the islands which now make up Indonesia: mainly to Malacca, Sumatra and Java. By the 16th century, Muslim Sultanates were in existence in Java, Malacca and the Moluccas. The latter, inhabited by Black populations, was ruled by an Indonesian military theocracy by the 15th century and called itself the Sultanate of Temate-Tidore. By the 16th century, the entire Indonesian archipelago had been Islamicized and the influence of Islam had spread to the westernmost area of West Papua New Guinea. At present, between 15% and 20% of our population is Moslem. At any rate, an important Arab-Malay trade route was in existence in the 14th and 15th centuries, linking West Papua New Guinea to the rest of Indonesia, the Middle and Near East and right up to Turkey. Malay and Arab traders raided the coasts of West Papua New Guinea for slaves throughout those centuries and right up till the 19th century. The offshore island of Biak acted as a slave-trade outpost, very much like Zanzibar was at the same period. Hence, from the 13th or 14th centuries onwards, Black slaves were being captured and carted away to the chief slave markets in the Middle East and Turkey. In another direction, Papuan slaves were being carried massively to satisfy the demand of the medieval Chinese Empire. From Iraq, Papuan slaves were resold to Turkey, and from Turkey many of them were resold to Russia. These are historical facts.

Question: That is certainly amazing!

Answer: Then, of course, during the 19th century, Papuans were being taken into slavery to work on the sugar plantations of the state of Queensland, in Australia, when not reduced to slavery on the spot by the Dutch, the Germans, the British and Australians. Maybe historians will one day be in the position to tell how many hundreds of thousands, or millions, of our people were taken into slavery from the 13th and 14th centuries up to the end of the 19th century. At any rate, I have read reports of aboriginal Black Fillipinos having been taken as slaves into Mexico by Spanish slave dealers during the heyday of the Atlantic slave trade. It wouldn't at all surprise me if some of our people had also been taken to the Americas during the period!

Question: The parallel between the history of Blacks in New Guinea and that of Blacks in Africa and elsewhere is no doubt remarkable. Do you find that Africans are aware of this?

Answer: Maybe not aware in all of its details, but certainly so in terms of a recognition that we are part and parcel of the African family and that as such we, the Blacks in Melanesia, and our brethren on the African continent have a common past and a single destiny. Between the past and the future, there is therefore room for a present-day, active solidarity.

Question: Has the Revolutionary Provisional Government of West Papua New Guinea enjoyed much of that solidarity to date?

Answer: Yes and no. Yes, if solidarity is meant sympathy with our struggle by our brothers in Africa and the Caribbean. No, if by solidarity is meant concrete material and humanitarian aid. So far, only the Republic of Senegal has granted us a limited aid and allowed us to open an Information Mission in Senegal. It began operating at the end of 1976. But things are changing fast in our favor and already more than a dozen Black nations of Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific have made known to our government, in one way or another, that they support our national liberation struggle.

Question: Can you name those nations?

Answer: I would prefer for them to do so themselves whenever they so deem it appropriate.

Question: What would you say is your ideology?

Answer: In answer to that question, I shall quote our President, who said: "We are not going to get involved in ideological blocks. We have our ideology already: Melanesian nationalism!" We are Melanesian nationalists. No less, no more. We believe that the Black peoples of Melanesia must determine their own future, work together with their brethren in the rest of the Black world to redeem Black peoples from their present position of servitude at the hands of other races, and rescue them from their present state of illiteracy, technological and economic backwardness, rampant diseases and general chaos. We believe that Black peoples, the Black race, has the right to aspire to something much, much, much better than what they have now.

Question: But, what does Melanesian nationalism mean in terms of social, political and economic structures?

Answer: I think it means giving people a chance to decide for themselves, without arm-twisting, what they really want and how they want it.

Question: Where does the R.P.G. situate itself in the controversy of capitalism vs. communism, in terms of economic structures and also in terms of ideology?

Answer: We feel that our people, based on their so-called primitive communal experience, can define the type of democratic, economic and social structures better suited to a rapid social and technological development and which, at the same time, preserve and develop what is best in our society. We think that it is possible to find new models of development which can insert our people into the modern world, while preserving those features of our society which give us spiritual fulfillment.

Question: What role would private capital play in such a model?

Answer: Our country is an extremely underdeveloped country, in fact, compared to most nations in the world, our country appears as not developed at all. To bring about development in such a situation will require skills, manpower and capital which we at present do not have. Hence, we will be looking towards the Black world for these. If the capital which the Black world can provide to develop our nation is private, we will take it. If it is state capital, we will also take it. We will take whatever the Black world can spare on our behalf.

Question: And how about capital, private or state, from the leading technological powers: Japan, USA, USSR, China, West Germany, France, Great Britain, etc.?

Answer: Our relationship with any of those outside countries--by outside, I mean non-Black--will entirely depend on their past attitudes towards our people and, more so, on their present attitudes towards Indonesia on the one hand, and our people on the other. Those who are helping, financing, arming, abetting and supporting Indonesia in its attempt to exterminate our people, cannot expect anything but lasting opposition from our part in the future. Moreover, nations like Japan, Holland, Australia, Britain and Germany (both Germany's) owe us a lot of money in terms of reparations for the periods over which they exercised control over our people, exploited the natural and human resources of our nation and plundered its peoples. Reparations will be a top priority on our lists of requirements once we achieve our freedom.

Question: How rich is the Island of New Guinea?

Answer: Fourteen of the world's sixteen strategic minerals are reported to be found in abundant quantities on our island: copper, gold, nickel, uranium, cobalt, iron ore, manganese, oil, lead, tin. In the western half alone, according to geological reports, 10% of the world's known reserves of crude oil are to be found. The biggest deposits of copper in the world are also reported to be found on the island. That will give you a rough idea.

Question: Taking into account the military might of Indonesia, its sheer superiority in terms of men, financial resources and foreign backing, how does the R.P.G. intend to liberate the rest of the country with hardly any weapons, less than 10,000 men and no material backing from the outside?

Answer: That was the question our people posted to themselves more than ten years ago, when they decided to challenge Indonesia. That is the question that our ancestors in New Guinea, in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific must have asked themselves over and over again, in the face of the invading white man. In the years of struggle against Indonesia, we think we have found the answer. The answer is: reliance on the courage, awakening and determination of our people to be free: reliance on the active and total support of the Black world. There is no other answer. If we are wrong, then another Black community will have been exterminated from the face of our planet!

\*This interview is an abbreviated version of a longer interview done with Foreign Minister Ben Tanggahma by Shawna Maglangbayan and Carlos Moore in Dakar on February 16, 1976. The complete interview is contained in two issues of the Association of African Historians' Newsletter, Volume 1, Numbers 9 and 10.

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