

West Papua: Indigenous people fight back against land grabbing – Church stands in solidarity with them

Protest against military projects and forced land acquisition – GKI-TP supports resistance with pastoral letters

(Wuppertal/Biak Numfor, February 16, 2026) In West Papua, the conflict over large-scale government development and military projects continues to escalate. Around 5,600 hectares of indigenous land in East Biak, Supiori, and North and South Biak are to be claimed for the construction of a military headquarters and a satellite airfield as part of a national space program. The indigenous communities affected strongly oppose these plans.

Church in Papua denounces land grabbing

In a [pastoral letter dated February 11](#) and a joint protest march in Biak Numfor, the Evangelical Christian Church in Papua (GKI-TP), a member of the United Evangelical Mission (UEM), is calling for an immediate halt to the unlawful confiscation of traditional indigenous land for economic and military purposes. In doing so, it is sending a clear signal of solidarity with the affected communities.

The letter also points out that the necessary consent of the rightful owners of traditional land areas has not been obtained. Representatives of the indigenous institution Biak Numfor Kankain Karkara Byak emphasized that the land in question belongs to the traditional community of the Abrau-Rumander from the Warbon tribe in North Biak. A signed declaration of consent that is circulating is a forgery.

Land is life

A [second letter from the GKI-TP](#) explains the consequences of state land grabbing for the indigenous population. For the communities affected, it is not just about the land: in Papua, traditional land is inextricably linked to identity, history, spirituality, and collective dignity. Forced resettlement as a result of the military plans would mean the loss of cultural belonging, linguistic identity, and social roots. Any transfer of traditional land rights to the Indonesian state deprives communities of administrative and inheritance rights, transforms their habitat into military zones, and jeopardizes the livelihoods and economic independence of future generations. At the same time, members of the communities report long-standing intimidation and violence by state security forces. There is therefore considerable concern that the expansion of military presence could lead to new human rights violations.

The situation is also worsening in Supiori and South Biak: in Supiori, the land of the Adfat community has been unlawfully seized for military-backed plantation and fishing projects. In South Biak, the Manuhua military airfield is to be expanded; several communities are being asked to leave their land. Observers point to serious power imbalances and the failure to enforce the rights of the indigenous population.

Support from the UEM and the West Papua Network

The UEM stands alongside its member church GKI-TP in its commitment to justice and the protection of the rights of indigenous peoples. "When indigenous communities in Papua are deprived of their land and the military presence is expanded, it is not just about land, but about identity, culture, livelihoods, and dignity. We take the urgent voices from Biak and Supiori very seriously and stand alongside the people and the church on the ground who are demanding transparency, free consent, and the protection of their rights," said Thea Hummel, head of the UEM's advocacy department.

The [West Papua Network](#) also reaffirms its support for the demands of the indigenous Papuan people to protect their land rights. The network is committed to ensuring that development and environmental protection in West Papua are understood as a socially just process that focuses on indigenous rights, biodiversity, and long-term ecological stability. The coordinator of the West Papua Network, Barbara Hillebrand, says: "West Papua is one of the last large intact natural regions in Southeast Asia. Lowland rainforests, savannas, and wetlands not only form a globally significant climate buffer, but have also been the basis of life for indigenous communities for generations. It is precisely these landscapes that are now under massive pressure in West Papua. The expansion of military activities and national development projects in West Papua is not promoting development and security in West Papua, but rather leading to flight, displacement, and the loss of land rights, history, and culture of the indigenous Papuan people. The slogan "Papua bukan tanah kosong" – "Papua is not empty land" sums up the demand of the indigenous Papuan people: indigenous (land) rights must be recognized and protected. Development must not be based on expropriation, militarization, and ecological destruction.

Call for solidarity with Papua

The Church and indigenous communities in Papua are calling on the Indonesian government to stop the planned expansion of oil palm plantations and military presence throughout West Papua. They strongly reject the land grab of traditional indigenous communities' land and call on the global church community to show solidarity.

About „UEM“

The United Evangelical Mission (UEM) with offices in Germany, Indonesia and Tanzania is an international, equal communion of 39 members, including 32 Protestant churches in Africa and Asia as well as six Protestant churches and the v. Bodelschwingh Foundations Bethel in Germany. The UEM consistently pursues a holistic understanding of mission. This includes improving the living conditions of suffering and disadvantaged people while respecting their personal dignity and taking their cultural context into account.