

## ‘Killed like animals’: documents reveal how Australia turned a blind eye to a West Papuan massacre

*Dozens of West Papuans were tortured and thrown into the sea 23 years ago. Days later, Australia knew details of the attack, yet remained silent*



*Yudha Korwa fled West Papua and came to Australia in 2006 after a massacre by the Indonesian military.*

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In the pre-dawn light, beneath a water tower on the West Papuan island of Biak, Yudha Korwa lay bleeding in the dirt.

Four days earlier, the young high school student, full of hope in post-Suharto, Reformasi [Indonesia](#), had joined hundreds of other independence activists to fly the Morning Star, the banned West Papuan flag, near Biak's harbour.

Now he was feigning death among the bodies, watching a scene of pure horror unfold around him.

Korwa remembers hearing screams of “help me, help me, help me” and the roar of an Indonesian military helicopter overhead, raining bullets down on the protesters.

Women and children were cut down before his eyes. Some were singing hymns as the troops opened fire.

Bullets tore through the neck and stomach of two of his friends.

“They were killing like they killed animals,” he says. “They don’t think these are human beings, they are thinking these are animals.”

Korwa’s skull was cracked from the butt of an Indonesian soldier’s rifle and his stomach was bleeding heavily from a machete wound.

One thought sustained him: he had to live, so that someone could tell the world what had happened on Biak on 6 July 1998.

“I thought ‘I don’t think I will be dead today, because one day I will tell the international community what has happened here’.”

In the 23 years since, not one person has been charged with the killings. The massacre is not recognised officially and no government or international inquiry has reported on it.

The Indonesian government has either denied or downplayed the deaths.

When bodies began washing up on Biak’s beaches, many mutilated horrifically, the Indonesian military blamed a tsunami in Papua New Guinea, more than 1,000km away.

Australia has only ever offered a muted response, expressing concern to the Indonesian government but not condemning the massacre.

The true extent of the Howard government’s knowledge of the massacre has, until now, largely remained unknown.

But a newly released, unredacted intelligence report handed to Guardian Australia reveals an Australian intelligence officer provided the government with compelling evidence just 11 days after the killings that Indonesia “almost certainly used excessive force against pro-independence demonstrators”.

The same officer was also handed photographic evidence by West Papuans on Biak, at great risk to their safety. The photos were distributed to his superiors within defence, but never saw the light of day.

New evidence suggests they have since been destroyed by the defence department, despite consistent calls for a proper investigation into the atrocity.

The revelations have shocked survivors.



*Yudha Korwa fled West Papua and came to Australia in 2006 after a massacre by the Indonesian military.*

“From the document ... I can see that Australia is still waiting, they’re still staying quiet and lost their mouth and pretending like they didn’t know what was going on,” Korwa said.

“But this is not secret any more.”

‘Disturbing’: Australian secret mission to Biak

Five days after the massacre, Dan Weadon, an Australian military attaché and intelligence officer connected to the Jakarta embassy, boarded a plane to Biak, the newly released document shows.

Officially, he was only on the island due to a forced stopover with a commercial flight to the city of Jayapura.

Unofficially, he was there to investigate the events of 6 July.

His presence on the island quickly aroused suspicion.

Plainclothes officers started tailing Weadon the day after he arrived, interrogating staff at his hotel about the Australian’s activities. Others seen talking to Weadon were quickly interrogated about their conversations.

Weadon visited the massacre site, but reported that the “site of the incident has been cleaned up” and the “people so intimidated” that any investigation would be difficult.

He took photos of 50 bullet holes that riddled the Biak water tower, and met with two Australian aid volunteers working on the island, who had collected information from witnesses and compiled their own report.

“The people were surrounded and tried to run. If they ran they were shot. If they stayed still they were shot,” the volunteers’ report said. “The shots were mainly in the legs of the people present. Our friend described open bullet wounds, lots of blood and dead bodies.”

Weadon was also handed a roll of film said to contain photographic evidence of the “injuries received by separatists at the hands of ABRI [the Indonesian military]”.

Despite warnings that such a meeting was dangerous, the source of the photographs later talked to Weadon, pleading for help.

“[He] wept while stating that life in Irian Jaya was very difficult and dangerous, and that it was hoped that [Weadon] would be able to do something to help,” the intelligence report reads.

Weadon eventually spoke to a local military officer , who downplayed the violence, saying no one was killed and only four people were badly wounded.

The officer spoke of the time he spent being taught by the Australian Defence Force in Australia.

“He also stated that the flag raising action was not a reformation demonstration, but was an attack upon the government (Makar) and the country,” Weadon reported. “He likened the action to that of Iraq invading Kuwait, and justified his response as being comparable to the US-led effort to expel Iraq from Kuwait.

“It was obvious that he saw the separatist demonstration as being an act just short of war.”

Weadon’s final intelligence report on his Biak trip landed on 17 July 1998.

It concluded that it was “highly likely” that the military “acted in a very heavy-handed manner during and after their assault on demonstrators”.

“The timings of shots heard by [the Australian volunteers] indicate that shots ... were fired for a much longer period than would probably have been necessary to simply shock and pacify the demonstrators, indicating that some extra-judicial punishment with live and/or rubber bullets may have been exacted.”

The report could easily have remained secret. Previous attempts to secure it through freedom of information laws, including by the Australia West Papua Association, have been blocked by the Australian government.

But last year, Anthony Craig, a campaigner for justice in West Papua, sought a copy from the National Archives of Australia.

The archives initially sought exemptions to redact significant parts of the report, but last month, facing action in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, it gave Craig and his lawyers, Xenophon Davis, access to the document in its entirety.

During the proceedings, it emerged the photos handed to Weadon appear to have been destroyed by defence in 2014 under a policy governing the handling of intelligence material.

Xenophon Davis partner Mark Davis described the destruction of the photos, which could be evidence of crimes against humanity, as “disturbing” and sickening.

“The photos were not created by Australian intelligence, they were entrusted to them by the families of the injured and the dead who trusted that Australia would act upon those photos or at least safeguard the evidence,” he said.

In response, the defence department said only that its retention, archival, and disposal of official records is governed by archives law, and that “records are subject to routine review and destruction”.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has always maintained it raised concerns directly with Indonesia immediately after it became aware of reports of violence on the island.

“This included high-level representations by then foreign minister Downer during his visit to Jakarta on 8-10 July 1998, with then Indonesian foreign minister [Mr Alatas] and then commander of the Indonesian armed forces [General Wiranto],” a spokesperson told the Guardian in 2013.

‘They turned away’: anger and sadness at Australia

Eben Kirksey has a clear memory of the night before the massacre.

The young American, an undergraduate anthropology student on exchange, was in his hotel room near Biak’s airport.

He watched a troop transport glide in from the sky. Soon, there were Indonesian soldiers everywhere. Kirksey remembers seeing them eating at the canteen across the road.

“There was a real sense that something was about to happen,” he said.



*Eben Kirksey was on the island of Biak in 1998, when the massacre took place.*

All week, there had been an air of optimism about the protest under the water tower. The dictator Suharto was out and Indonesia was in its early reform era, promising movement towards democracy and liberalism. The protesters' civil disobedience had triggered meetings with civilian, church and military authorities.

“There was this sense that they were achieving what they had hoped for, with this tactic that we've seen now in the Arab spring and Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter.”

In the early hours of 6 July, the hope was gone. Kirksey could hear gunshots ringing out from his hotel room.

Across the harbour, navy ships loomed ominously.

Sketchy reports started filtering through that protesters had been shot. The next day, needing a phone to organise a ferry, Kirksey walked to the harbour, still oblivious to the scale and severity of what had happened.

“One of the only telephones in town was right where the occupation had happened and where the massacre had happened,” he said.

“I wandered through there as they were starting to clean up the site.”

Kirksey remembers seeing the same bullet holes described in the Weadon report.

“I was there, I saw those bullet holes.”

Rumours also took hold that bodies had been taken to the Indonesian ships and thrown overboard.

It wasn't until 27 July, well after Weadon left the island, that the bodies started to wash ashore. Many were mutilated or showed signs of torture.

“Thirty-three bodies of men, women and children were found on the beaches of east and north Biak, and the government tried to claim these were bodies from a tsunami – a tsunami that took place in Papua New Guinea, another country,” Kirksey said.

“I talked to one woman who was on the boat, she jumped and swam back to shore. Before she jumped, she told me those bodies of women, men and children, she saw them on the boat and these were people she knew. Women were getting raped, these bodies, some of them were beheaded when they washed up on the shore.

“Really the most horrific things that we can imagine that humans might do to each other, this was happening that day.”

The experience on Biak changed Kirksey's life irrevocably.

He began investigating. Two years later he won a scholarship at Oxford University to study Indonesian state violence in the region, and published a book on the Biak massacre in 2012.

Now an associate professor with Deakin University, Kirksey has reviewed Weadon's newly released intelligence report.

The document shows the Australian government was told, in no uncertain terms, that something major had happened on Biak.

Its response was to turn a blind eye, Kirksey says.



*Eben Kirksey has devoted his life to studying Indonesian state violence.*

The destruction of the photos was an even worse betrayal.

“You can have a massacre of this scale and it doesn’t get noticed, it doesn’t get registered, it gets actively forgotten, there is a deliberate destruction,” he said.

“It makes me sad, it makes me angry. People with the capacity to help, people with the capacity to respond, they turned away.”

A remarkable escape and a plea for justice

Korwa managed to escape Biak with his life, somehow.

For two long nights, wounded and bloodied, he hid in a road culvert from the Indonesian troops.

Eventually, he would plot a miraculous journey to Australia with other West Papuan activists aboard traditional canoes.

He sought protection, successfully, and is now an Australian citizen, living in Melbourne.

Korwa is now pleading with the Australian government to lead the charge for an official investigation.

Aside from an unofficial citizen’s tribunal held in Sydney in 2013, no inquiry has ever reported on the events in Biak.

An investigation into the massacre by the Indonesian human rights commission, Komnas Ham, was raised by the body as recently as last year, but it has never concluded – despite the passage of more than 20 years.

“Since the massacre, Australia they didn’t say anything,” Korwa says.

“So I want to say like this: I’m now an Australian citizen. [Will] Australia stand up to fight for my right or not? I’m an Australian citizen so I have the right to say: ‘Look, this has happened, 20 years ago. I’m here now ... I’m Australian. I need your help to push for a more serious investigation’.”