

TAPOL regrets Court sentencing of ‘Balikpapan Seven’ political prisoners

(London, 17 June 2020) TAPOL regrets the sentencing of seven West Papuan political prisoners today in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan province. The Seven were arrested in early September 2019 and accused of being the masterminds behind the ‘West Papua Uprising’, mass anti-racism protests in August and September last year. Prosecutors demanded that harsh prison sentences should be handed to the Seven, which has caused a rise in tensions in recent weeks in West Papua. However, judges took a different view and displayed more leniency:

- Buchtart Tabuni was sentenced to 11 months in prison after prosecutors demanded 17 years. While prosecutors sought the heaviest sentence for Tabuni, he was in fact not involved at all in the Uprising due to political differences with its organisers.
- Agus Kossay was sentenced to 11 months even though prosecutors had demanded 15 years’ imprisonment.
Kossay is Chair of West Papua National Committee (KNPB). During the uprising, he invited people to join the protest peacefully.
- Stevanus Itlay was sentenced to 11 months’ prison time while prosecutors had demanded 15 years.
Itlay is Chair of KNPB in the Mimika area, and was not involved in any of the protests that took place in Jayapura.
- Prosecutors demanded 10 years in prison for Ferry Gombo; judges imposed a sentence of 10 months.
Gombo is head of Universitas Cenderawasih’s student association and had convened a meeting in order to organise the protest. He also drafted and delivered a letter notifying police of the student association’s intention to protest.
- Alexander Gobai was sentenced to 10 months in prison. Prosecutors sought 10 years.
Gobai was also head of a university student association, (Universitas Sains dan Teknologi Jayapura (USTJ)), and had been chosen as protest coordinator.
- Hengky Hillapok was sentenced to 10 months’ prison time while prosecutors demanded 5 years.
Hillapok, also a USTJ student, coordinated logistical elements of the protests, namely hiring cars and a sound system.
- Irwanus Uropmabin was sentenced to 10 months in prison despite prosecutors demanding five years.
Also a USTJ student, Uropmabin was in charge of monitoring security.

During their trials, prosecutors and judges focused on putting the political beliefs of the Seven on trial, rather than the riots which they were alleged to have masterminded.

The list of goods submitted as evidence by prosecutors has been criticised widely as it included a belt, key chain, calculators, a roll of cable, phone and laptop chargers, a decorative lights cable, and other objects which had no demonstrable connection to the accusations levelled by prosecutors.

Furthermore, the Seven were all arrested without warrants, and some were then tortured, blindfolded and subjected to questioning without a lawyer being present. In early October 2019, having been in detention for around 1 month, they were transferred to Balikpapan prison, in breach of criminal procedure law, and without notification to their lawyers and their families for unspecified “security reasons”.

Currently there are 44 West Papuans in prison, charged with treason. There will be more trials in the coming weeks. In light of the trial of the Balikpapan Seven, last week several civil society organisations, including [TAPOL](#) and [ETAN](#), held webinars urging the authorities to release the Seven which also aimed to shed light on discriminatory judicial processes in West Papua.

The Balikpapan Seven should all have been released unconditionally and immediately following the Covid-19 outbreak. Their arbitrary detention, and that of other Papuan political prisoners, violates the fundamental principle of freedom of expression which is protected by both Indonesian and international law.

We urge prosecutors to not appeal the decision as it runs the risk of raising tensions and exacerbating conflict again.