

John Rumbiak, West Papuan activist, speaks at Simon Fraser University at Harbour Centre

—Bob Russell

On October 22, 2002, the Institute for the Humanities sponsored a public lecture at Harbour Centre by John Rumbiak, the leading human rights activist in West Papua, who was on a lecture tour across Canada. I was fortunate to have attended his first SFU talk (also sponsored by the Institute) just over a year and a half ago, where I had been most impressed by the strength and courage of the man. That talk, entitled “West Papua: The Next East Timor?” had been very timely, as the university was nearing the end of its 10-year CIDA-funded project in Indonesia and taking stock of the successes and failures of SFU’s dealing with the Suharto regime.

John Rumbiak was born in Biak in 1962, studied English at Cenderawasih University and human rights advocacy at Columbia University. He was also a participant in the Canada World Youth program. After a period as coordinator for studies and advocacy at the Rural Community Development Foundation (YPMD) in Papua, he became supervisor of ELS-HAM Papua, the Institute for Human Rights Study and Advocacy. ELS-HAM is committed to non-violence and working towards the demilitarization of West Papua, and empowering the people through advocacy. Rumbiak has travelled extensively to testify on human rights issues, including frequent visits to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and the US Congress. He is also a member of the board of directors of the Papua Resource Centre (based in New York City).

This lecture, entitled “Human Rights, Militarism and Terror in the Asia Pacific: The Case of West Papua” was equally timely. With the United States moving to restore aid to the Indonesian armed forces which had been suspended over the issue of human rights in East Timor, Indonesia now hopes to be a US ally against terrorism in Southeast Asia. Rumbiak explained how this strategy, apart from sacrificing human rights, may be counter-productive, since elements of the Indonesian army, like others in the region, are often themselves the authors of terrorist activities. Army officers have been implicated in killings and human rights abuses against ‘dissidents’ seeking self-determination for provinces like Papua and Aceh, and in sponsorship of Islamist militia groups like Laskar Jihad in predominantly Christian West Papua.

The talk was well attended, largely by individuals who



have long been interested in human rights issues in Indonesia and East Timor. In addition to introducing the relatively uninformed to the current situation in West Papua, it provided the opportunity for committed individuals to strengthen their support for a worthy cause—see, for example, the webpage at www.westpapua.ca which is maintained by a West Papua support group. In both of these respects, the Institute for the Humanities sponsorship of talks such as this one provides an invaluable service to the University and the larger community.

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