

Scars of Papua conflict weigh on Indonesia's vaccine drive

Decades of conflict, racism and rights abuses fuelling COVID conspiracy theories

JAYAPURA: “William” is refusing to take a coronavirus vaccine because he fears Indonesia’s military will use the country’s inoculation program to poison him and wipe out his fellow Papuans. Decades of conflict, racism and human rights abuses are fuelling COVID conspiracy theories among his neighbors at a time when their breakaway region is facing a renewed threat from the pandemic.

“I won’t take a vaccine if it’s brought here by Indonesia,” William, who asked not to use his real name, told AFP. He said that he would gladly sign up for any dose administered directly by the World Health Organization.

“But (many people) here are worried that if the jabs come through Indonesia they’ll be replaced with some other chemical substance that will kill us,” he added. There is no evidence of a genocidal plan by Indonesia, which has drafted the armed forces to help run a nationwide vaccination drive, including in Papua. But a widespread hatred of the military runs deep in the region, located on the eastern edge of the Southeast Asian archipelago nation and just north of Australia.

Security forces have been accused of committing atrocities against Papuan civilians during decades of fighting between a rebel independence movement and government troops.

Much of this conflict has centered around William’s hometown of Timika, near the world’s biggest gold mine—a potent

symbol for Papuans of the region’s exploitation and environmental devastation.

‘Trauma of violence’

Indonesia, as with many countries, has found its efforts to fight the pandemic hamstrung by both limited vaccine supplies and hesitancy driven by the spread of online disinformation. The spread of unfounded rumors in Papua mirrors a similar phenomenon across the border in Papua New Guinea, an independent nation with stronger cultural and historical ties to Papua than the rest of Indonesia.

Social media posts there falsely claimed to show evidence of locals being forcibly vaccinated in a mass medical trial, and even suggested that the vaccine campaign as part of a racial genocide plot. Papua’s long history of conflict and mistrust has created a wide audience for fearful rumors. “The conflict has been going on for so long (that)... whatever the central government is

doing will appear suspicious,” said Adriana Elisabeth, a Papua expert at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences.

Appeals by local activists have done little to lift low vaccination numbers among Papuans, which stand at fewer than 30,000 — less than one percent of the region’s population.

Papua has sailed through earlier waves of the pandemic relatively unscathed, with its 40,000 confirmed infections a tiny fraction of Indonesia’s total. But it is now threatened by the highly

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Trauma of violence still haunts

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TIMIKA, Indonesia: This file photo taken on August 10, 2021 shows a group of women gathering to protest against the COVID-19 coronavirus vaccine offered by the Indonesian government in Timika, Papua. —AFP

contagious Delta variant that has wreaked havoc elsewhere in Indonesia and other parts of Southeast Asia, and its underfunded health system is ill-equipped to navigate a crisis.

Authorities have blamed low take-up rates on social media hoaxes and say Papuan church leaders have also stoked doubts over the seriousness of the pandemic and staged mask-burning demonstrations. “The military is just an excuse,” said Aaron Rumanin, head of the illness prevention division at Papua’s health agency, adding that it was mostly civilians handling vaccinations. “But we are not giving up. We’ll focus on those who are keen instead of the ones who reject vaccines.” —AFP

Japan ruling party sets leadership race date before poll

TOKYO: Japan’s ruling party yesterday set a September 29 date for a leadership race ahead of an expected October general election and with Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga facing record-low approval.

Suga, who was appointed after the resignation of Shinzo Abe last year, is facing tough criticism over his response to the coronavirus pandemic. His government’s approval rating has nosedived to an all-time low of 31.8 percent according to a poll by the Kyodo news agency earlier this month.

The Liberal Democratic Party’s election commission approved the date yesterday morning, with a general meeting expected to approve the decision later in the day. Suga faces at least three leadership challengers, including former foreign minister Fumio Kishida, LDP policy chief Hakubun Shimomura and hawkish party member Sanae Takaichi. But Suga has the support of the party’s powerful secretary

general, and is so far favored to lead his party into a general election that has to be called by late October. Despite his government’s weak standing, the LDP is not expected to lose the parliamentary majority it holds as part of a coalition, with the opposition fragmented and so far unable to put a major challenge.

Suga has been battered by his government’s response to the pandemic, with Japan struggling through a record fifth wave of the virus after a slow start to its vaccine program. Much of the country is currently under virus restrictions, and the measures have been in place in some areas for almost the entire year. But they have been insufficient to stop a surge in cases driven by the more contagious Delta variant, even as the vaccine program has picked up pace with nearly 43 percent of the population fully inoculated. Japan has recorded around 15,500 deaths during the pandemic. —AFP

Death sentence upheld for Charleston church shooter Roof

CHARLESTON: A US court of appeals on Wednesday upheld the death sentence of Dylann Roof, the white shooter convicted of killing nine Black worshippers at a South Carolina church in 2015. Armed with a .45-caliber pistol, Roof fired 77 rounds in his shooting spree at the historic Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston on June 17, 2015.

Roof, who was 21 at the time, “murdered African Americans at their church, during their Bible-study and worship. They had welcomed him. He slaughtered them,” read the court’s ruling in part. “He did so with the express intent of terrorizing not just his immediate victims... but as many similar people as would hear of the mass murder.”

Roof, now 27, is not at risk of execution in the short term as President Joe Biden’s administration has imposed a moratorium on federal executions. As stated in a racist manifesto, Roof’s

goal was “to foment racial division and strife” across the country. “No cold record or careful parsing of statutes and precedents can capture the full horror of what Roof did.

His crimes qualify him for the harshest penalty that a just society can impose,” the ruling read.

The Mother Emanuel AME Church massacre “is one of the worst events in not only South Carolina’s history but also our nation’s history,” said Nathan Williams, one of the lead prosecutors on the case at the US attorney’s office in South Carolina. Roof was sentenced in early 2017 without having expressed regret or apologies. His lawyers appealed the conviction on grounds that Roof should not have represented himself in the trial — an argument that failed to convince the appeals court. —AFP



Dylann Roof