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Indonesia: Papuan pro-independence activist jailed for raising a flag finally freed

Papuan pro-independence activist Filep Karma tasted freedom today after being unjustly jailed for more than a decade for simply raising an independence flag at a political ceremony in 2004, Amnesty International said.

“Filep Karma spent more than a decade of his life in jail when he shouldn’t even have been jailed for a day. It was an outrageous travesty of justice and he should never have been brought to court,” said Josef Benedict, Amnesty International’s South East Asia Campaigns Director.

“Every Indonesian should have the right to freely express themselves and to the right to freely assemble but these rights were cruelly denied to Filep Karma.”

Amnesty International has long regarded Filep Karma as a prisoner of conscience and campaigned for his release. In 2011 the organization’s supporters in more than 80 countries sent more than 65,000 messages of support to him as part of its annual “Writes for Rights” campaign and called for his unconditional release.

Filep Karma consistently refused to accept a lesser sentence offered by the government, saying he would only accept an unconditional release and should never have been jailed in the first place.

The organization believes he was arbitrarily arrested because for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression and assembly by raising a flag and attending a political event.

“We hope that this will be the first step towards the release of all prisoners of conscience detained for their peaceful political expression in Papua and elsewhere in Indonesia,” said Josef Benedict.

Amnesty International hopes that Filep Karma’s release signals a move away from the repressive tactics frequently used by the authorities to silence peaceful dissent in the Papuan region. Besides releasing all prisoners of conscience, the Indonesian authorities must set up a mechanism to address the culture of impunity in Papua and deal with current and past cases of human rights violations by security forces.

Background

Filep Karma was among approximately 200 people who took part in a peaceful ceremony in Abepura, Papua Province on 1 December 2004. In commemoration of the declaration of Papuan independence in 1962, the Morning Star Flag - a banned symbol of Papuan independence - was raised. Police then advanced on the crowd, beating people with batons. Filep Karma was subsequently arrested and charged with “rebellion” under Articles 106 and 110 of the Indonesian Criminal Code. He was convicted on 26 May 2005 and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment.

During his visit to the provinces of Papua and West Papua in May, President Joko Widodo took steps which seemed to signal a move away from the repressive policies of past administrations. These included the release of five political activists, who were imprisoned following unfair trials based on forced confessions made as a result of torture or other ill-treatment, and a pledge to grant clemency or an amnesty to other political activists detained throughout the country.

He also announced that the authorities were lifting restrictions on foreign journalists, allowing them to access Papua, travel freely and report on the region.