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At least 300 villagers were hiding in a forest in Papua Province on Friday after they fled fighting between soldiers and separatists who killed a group of workers building a bridge in the area this month. (Antara Photo/Iwan Adisaputra)

By : Agustinus Beo Da Costa | on 10:55 PM December 14, 2018

Jakarta. At least 300 villagers were hiding in a forest in Papua Province on Friday after they fled fighting between soldiers and separatists who killed a group of workers building a bridge in the area this month.

They are cold and hungry after 11 days in the forest, Pastor Benny Giay, the head of Papua's Gospel Tabernacle Church, told Reuters by telephone.

"They are sheltering right on the slope of Trikora Peak," he said, referring to the 4,750-meter mountain in the Nduga area.

Security forces are hunting members of the military wing of the Free Papua Movement (OPM), which claimed responsibility for killing at least 16 workers and a soldier in the Nduga area this month.

The Indonesian Military (TNI) said in a statement that it was trying to convince the people to return to their homes and promised that the security forces would not fire at them.

"We, the Indonesian Army, will protect the people. We are all brothers, children of God. Even for the Free Papua Movement, if they want to surrender, we will forgive them," said Col. Jonathan Binsar Sianipar, the local military commander.

The rebels have rejected calls to surrender and demanded a referendum on the future of the resource-rich area plagued by conflict since it was incorporated into Indonesia after a controversial United Nations-backed referendum in 1969.

The OPM has said it viewed the workers as members of the military and casualties in a war against the government. Jakarta says they were civilians working on the Trans-Papua Highway project to improve connectivity in the impoverished province.

Pastor Giay urged the government to halt construction on the project, which has raised tensions in the province.

"I ask in general for construction work of the national road project to be stopped before the trauma that this country has created resurfaces again," he said.

The Protestant pastor said he feared a repeat of a 1996 military operation in which civilians, including children, were killed when security forces attacked separatists holding Indonesian and

foreign hostages.

President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo has pledged to continue building the highway. Since coming to power in 2014, he has tried to ease tensions in Papua by freeing prisoners, addressing some rights concerns and stepping up investment.

Reuters