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Angry response comes after newspaper claims chemical weapon was used in the remote region of Nduga

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Mon 24 Dec 2018 02.20 GMT

Last modified on Wed 26 Dec 2018 15.57 GMT



Indonesian soldiers and police carry a body bag containing the body of a victim of separatist attack in Nduga district in West Papua. Authorities have denied using white phosphorous during a military operation there. Photograph: Mujiono/AP

Indonesian authorities have angrily denied allegations of a white phosphorus attack on villagers in West Papua during a military operation this month.

The statement came after the Australian weekly the Saturday Paper published a photograph of a West Papuan villager with severe burns and a wounded leg and attributed the injuries to the use of white phosphorus.

Indonesia's foreign affairs ministry said it "gravely deplores" what it dubbed irresponsible media reporting.

"The allegation highlighted by the said media is totally baseless, non-factual, and gravely misleading," the ministry tweeted. "Indonesia possesses no chemical weapons."

The Indonesian military maintains it had been trying to recover bodies after a group of road construction workers were killed in the remote region of Nduga. The ministry said the report had overshadowed "the murder of 19 innocent civilians on 2 December 2018 by armed separatist groups in Nduga, Papua".

Papua military command's spokesman, Colonel Mumahammad Aidi, dismissed the newspaper's report as fake news propaganda. He said helicopters couldn't carry white phosphorus bombs.

"If the [military] was using phosphorus bombs, the Nduga district would have been wiped out," he said in a statement to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "All human beings and animals there would have been wiped out."

The Free West Papua movement called for an urgent investigation. "Where is the international outcry?" a spokesman tweeted. "There needs to be a UN Fact-Finding Mission to immediately visit West Papua to assess first-hand what is happening on the ground."

White phosphorus is highly toxic and burns in contact with oxygen. When it touches human skin it can cause deep burns that reach the bone. It is often used by militaries as a smokescreen or to mark targets.

White phosphorus and other incendiary weapons are prohibited for use against civilian populations under the international convention on certain conventional weapons.

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade said it was aware of continuing reports of violence in Nduga, Papua, including unverified reports of the alleged use of phosphorus projectiles.

"The government condemns all violence in Papua, affecting civilians and authorities alike," a spokesman said. "We will continue to monitor the situation, including through our diplomatic missions in Indonesia."

The authors of the Saturday Paper report John Martinkus and Mark Davis told the Guardian they had solid evidence of the attacks and accused the Indonesian government of dissembling. Sign up for Guardian Today Australian edition: the stories you need to read, in one handy email [Read more](#)

"Indonesia may enjoy throwing around Trump like accusations of fake news...What is not fake are the pictures of the canisters they fired, the horrific burns they inflicted through skin to bone and the witnesses to the shelling.

Indonesia needs to stop dissembling and answer how did the people suffer these terrible burns through to the bone? How did they die? Simple questions. They deserve honest answers."

The Indonesian-controlled Papua and West Papua provinces are located on the western half of the island of New Guinea. Political control has been contested for more than half a century and Indonesia has consistently been accused of human rights violations and violent suppression of the region's independence movement.

The indigenous people are Melanesian, closely linked to the people of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and New Caledonia.

Indonesia formalised its control over West Papua in 1969 when its military handpicked 1,026 West Papuans and compelled them into voting in favour of Indonesian annexation under a UN-supervised, but undemocratic, process known as the Act of Free Choice.