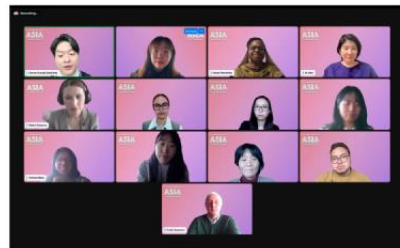


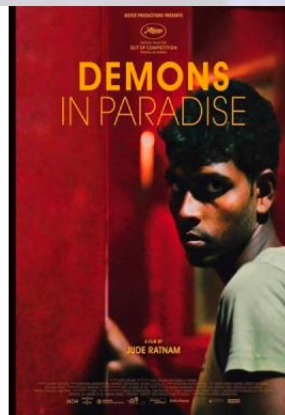
# 16<sup>TH</sup> HUMAN RIGHTS IN **ASIA** CONFERENCE 2024

Connecting the Dots of  
Colonial Legacies to Modern Injustices



**EVENT I  
ONLINE  
CONFERENCE**

**EVENT II  
FILM SCREENING**



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## Acknowledgements

The organising committee of the 16th Human Rights in Asia Conference: Connecting the Dots of Colonial Legacies to Modern Injustices would like to extend our heartfelt appreciation to the University of Essex and its dedicated staff for their unwavering support and guidance in making this another successful year. While student-led, the staff's invaluable contributions were instrumental in bringing this conference to fruition.

We would especially like to acknowledge the members of the Law and Human Rights Centre Events and Communications Team, Amy Swaine, and Catherine Freeman, for their logistical and background support, ensuring the smooth execution of this year's Human Rights in Asia Conference. Our sincere thanks go to Dr. Andrew Fagan for his insightful introductory remarks and for making the conference possible, Professor Colin Samson for adept moderation, and Ms. Judith Bueno de Mesquita for her thoughtful closing remarks and for their ongoing support in fostering a deeper understanding of the human rights legacies of colonisation. We are also grateful to Professor Lars Waldorf for leading the Human Rights film screening and Dr. Sanae Fujita for her expert guidance and supervision of this year's organising committee.

We extend our deepest gratitude to our esteemed panel of speakers: Ms. Ai Abe, Mrs. Maira Aisaeva, Ms. Rode Wanimbo, and Dr. Tin Mar Oo. Their presentations on the history of injustices and human rights violations in Okinawa, Uyghur, West Papua, and Myanmar, respectively, were deeply moving and instrumental in illuminating the enduring impact of colonialism on these regions. Their insights into the ongoing struggles for self-determination, environmental justice, discrimination, and displacement were both thought-provoking and inspiring. We also thank Ms. Nirmala Rajasingam for the thought-provoking human rights film screening. The importance of raising awareness and advocating for justice was a powerful thread throughout their discussions.

We are confident that the lessons learned from these experts will have a lasting impact on our understanding of modern injustices and our collective efforts to promote human rights.

A special thank you goes to the members of the organising committee, whose volunteerism, passion, and enthusiasm as human rights advocates were evident throughout the conference planning process. Each member's support, resilience, and motivation were invaluable. We are grateful for the opportunity to collaborate on such a meaningful endeavour and for the enduring relationships forged along the way.

We extend our thanks to all attendees who participated in and contributed to this year's Human Rights in Asia Conference. Your presence and support were vital to the conference's success and the ongoing dialogue on human rights in Asia. Finally, the lessons learned from the challenges posed by colonialism and the abuse of power over human rights persist; however, your collective efforts in raising awareness and advocating for justice are powerful tools in empowering the marginalised and holding those in power accountable. It is through continued engagement that we can hope to decolonise human rights problems and build a more just and equitable world.

# Conference Summary

## Event One: Online Conference

Human Rights Centre University of Essex

### 16<sup>TH</sup> HUMAN RIGHTS IN ASIA CONFERENCE 2024

**SAT 16 MAR 2024  
10AM-12PM(GMT)  
@ZOOM**

**Connecting the Dots of  
Colonial Legacies to Modern Injustices**

Despite that several decades have passed since the massive waves of decolonisation, the legacies of colonisation yet remain across Asia, leaving deep-seated imbalanced power structures and the marginalisation of certain ethnic, religious, or cultural groups.

Four activists from Asia - Okinawa, Uyghur, Papua and Rohingya - report on current human rights issues of colonial origin and the frontline of activism.

**REGISTER NOW!**

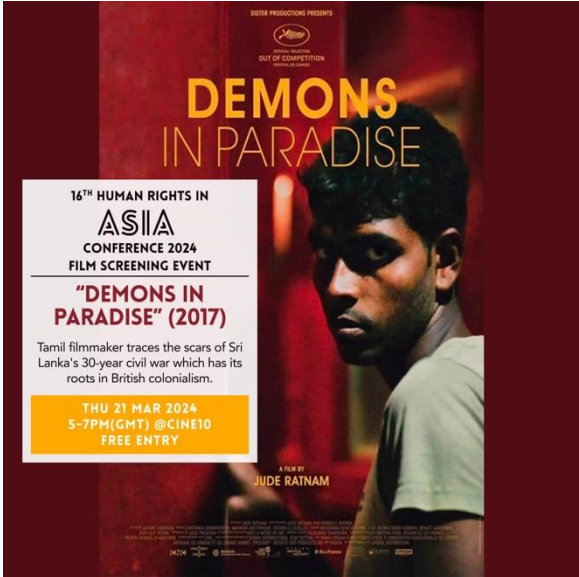
[https://essex-university.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_IQwEMt8q5JC3mkM4DLkzw](https://essex-university.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_IQwEMt8q5JC3mkM4DLkzw)

Date – Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> March, 2024, 10:00-12:30 (BST)

Timetable		
Date & Time	Session	Speaker
10:00 – 10:05	Welcome Session	Mr. Genta Suziki
10:05 – 10:10	Opening Remarks at the 16 <sup>th</sup> Human Rights in Asia Conference	Dr. Andrew Fagan
10:10 – 10:15	Introduction of the 16 <sup>th</sup> Human Rights in Asia Conference	Dr. Sanae Fujita
10:15 – 10:25	Introduction to the topic: Connecting the Dots of Colonial Legacies to Modern Injustices	Professor Colin Samson
10:25 – 10:40	Presentation 1: History of Injustices and Human Rights Violation in West Papua	Ms. Rode Wanimbo
10:40 – 10:55	Presentation 2: A Colonial Atrocity in Uyghur	Ms. Ai Abe
10:55 – 11:10	Presentation 3: Okinawa's Ongoing Human Rights Issues for Self-Determination and Environmental Justice	Mrs. Maira Aisaeva
11:10 – 11:40	Panel Discussion and Q&A	Moderator: Professor Colin Samson

		Panelists: Ms. Rode Wanimbo, Ms. Ai Abe, and Mrs. Maira Aisaeva
11:40 – 11:55	Closing Remarks at the 16 <sup>th</sup> Human Rights in Asia Conference	Ms. Judith Bueno de Mesquita
11:55 – 12:10	After event presentation at the 16 <sup>th</sup> Annual Human Rights in Asia Conference: Colonial-era Challenges towards the Rohingya within Myanmar	Dr. Tin Mar Oo

**Event Two: “Demons in Paradise” (2017) Film Screening Event**



**Onsite Event – Thursday 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024, 17:00-19:00 (BST), CINE10, University of Essex**  
**Moderated by:** Professor Lars Waldorf  
**Keynote Speaker:** Ms. Nirmala Rajasingam  
**Followed by Q&A Session**

**Speaker Biographies**

**Event One: Online Conference**

*Ms. Ai Abe, Human Rights Activist, Researcher, and Writer from Okinawa, Japan.*



Ai is a human rights activist, researcher, and a writer based in Okinawa, Japan. She is a Visiting Researcher at the University of the Ryukyus and serves as secretariat of All Okinawa Council of Human Rights (AOCHR). She has continuously documented and analysed Okinawan human rights issues from the perspective of international human rights law and reported them to the UN human rights bodies. She also provides technical support to human rights activists and civil society organisations in Okinawa to promote the use of international human rights law and the UN human rights system. Her research interest is in the right to self-determination of Okinawan people and she has written extensively to advocate the right.

Ai received her LL.M in International Human Rights Law with Distinction from the University of Essex in 2019.

***Dr. Tin Mar Oo, Medical Doctor and Rohingya Feminist, Myanmar.***



Mar Oo, a medical doctor and Rohingya feminist, has dedicated over a decade to initiatives concerning social cohesion, peacebuilding, women's empowerment, and protection in Myanmar's Rakhine state. Currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Montana, her research focuses on analysing the consequences of land rights violations and environmental injustices against the Rohingya population. She holds a Master's degree in Public Health from the Australian National University and has studied Global Developmental and Environmental Challenges at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.



She has worked for several NGOs and INGOs such as Center for Social Integrity, Women Peace Network, Altsean Burma, Mote Oo Education. She has been working with the International Rescue Committee as a protection lead for Rakhine and Chin and her organization "RAISA", Southeast Asian Rohingya Network has been actively engaged in transitional justice and youth empowerment efforts in Bangladesh and Myanmar.

***Ms. Rode Wanimbo, Peace Activist from West Papua***



Rode, Chair of the Women's Department of the Evangelical Church of Indonesia, is a passionate advocate for the liberation of West Papua and the restoration of cultural heritage. She tirelessly speaks out for the rights of women and children affected by conflict between Indonesian forces and West Papuan independence fighters.

Rode initiated a women's group dedicated to decolonizing the Bible, aiming to empower Pacific women through reinterpretation of biblical texts. Through her "storytelling circles," she provides a platform for Indigenous women to share their experiences and emotions, addressing trauma resulting from displacement. Additionally, Rode collects oral testimonies to amplify their voices, even submitting joint reports to the UN on the issue of internally displaced persons in West Papua. She emphasizes the importance of preserving West Papuan culture and traditions, highlighting the destruction caused by colonialism.

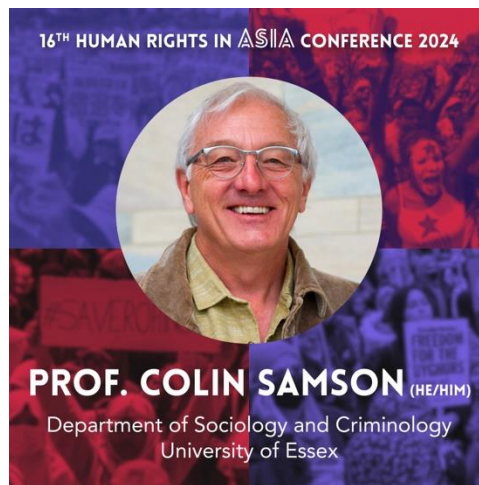
Rode's advocacy reflects her deep connection to her homeland and her determination to defend the rights and dignity of her people. As a speaker at the Human Rights Conference in Asia 2024, she will shed light on the enduring legacy of colonialism and ongoing injustices faced by the people of West Papua.

***Mrs. Maira Aisaeva, Activist, and Chair of the UK Uyghur Community***



Mrs. Maira is an Activist, and Chair of the UK Uyghur Community since 2021. She also volunteers at London Uyghur School and is a member of the World Uyghur Congress. Her work focuses on lobbying and raising awareness on the mass atrocities concerning the Uyghur community. While participating in a variety of campaigns and demonstrations, she has been working on sharing experience with communities and organising cultural events for the Uyghur community.

***Professor Colin Samson, Department of Sociology and Criminology, University of Essex - Moderator***



Colin possesses extensive research expertise in the areas concerning Indigenous Peoples, Human Rights, and Colonialism.

Over two decades, he has been working with the indigenous Innu peoples of the Labrador-Quebec peninsula. His publications on the Innu cover different aspects, from the effects of forced assimilation to the intellectual and political architecture by which settler societies justified the suppression of the culturally diverse ideas and practices of indigenous peoples, as well as contemporary efforts by indigenous groups to reverse some of the more damaging aspects of colonialism through cultural revitalisation projects.



His most recent book, *Indigenous Peoples and Colonialism: Global Perspectives* (Polity Press, 2016), devoted to puncturing national vanities and situating indigenous peoples struggles with ongoing colonialism in global perspectives.

## **Event Two: “Demons in Paradise” (2017) Film Screening Event**

***Ms. Nirmala Rajasingam, South Asia Solidarity Group/ Movement for Peoples’ Struggles – Sri Lanka***



Ms. Nirmala is active with the South Asia Solidarity Group and the Movement for Peoples' Struggles - Sri Lanka (UK). Her political involvements caused her to flee both the Sri Lankan state and the dominant Tamil militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), to lead a life of exile in the UK. Drawing on her distinctive background in political activism within Sri Lanka, Nirmala offered invaluable perspectives during the discussion and provided firsthand insights into the domestic socio-political landscape.

***Professor Lars Waldorf, Professor at Essex Law School and Northumbria Law School - Moderator***



Lars began his human rights career in apartheid-era South Africa, initially involved in relief work in Crossroads after police demolished shacks of squatters violating "pass laws." Recognizing the limitations of humanitarian efforts, he transitioned to legal advocacy, practicing as a poverty and civil rights lawyer in the United States. He later worked on trials at the UN's Rwanda Tribunal and ran Human Rights Watch's Rwanda field office.

Transitioning into academia, he taught human rights at various institutions before joining the University of Essex. His research primarily focuses on transitional justice, exploring accountability for human rights abuses post-dictatorship and war, with recent projects emphasizing legal empowerment and the arts for accountability and reparations in conflict-affected regions.

Additionally, he has provided consultancy services to various human rights organizations and contributed to scholarly journals in the field.

## Conference Reports

### Event One: Online Conference

#### Introductions at the 16<sup>th</sup> Human Rights in Asia Conference

Dr. Andrew Fagan, former Director of the Human Rights Clinic, and Dr. Sanae Fujita, Fellow at the University of Essex and Supervisor for the Student Organising Committee of the Conference, inaugurated the 16<sup>th</sup> Human Rights in Asia Conference on 16<sup>th</sup> March, 2024.

Dr. Andrew Fagan began the opening remarks by expressing the pride the Human Rights Clinic had in its students and their passion and commitment to human rights cause both in terms of scholarship education and the practical side of human rights

too. He highlighted the importance of this initiative stating that the conference is a highlight event and evidence of the passionate commitment of the students. Welcoming the attendees to the conference and the human rights clinic he introduced the topic for this year 'Connecting the Dots of Colonial Legacies to Modern Injustices.' He praised the commitment of the student organizing team and acknowledged Dr. Sanae Fujita's crucial and pivotal contribution in advancing the conference over its 16-year history.

Dr. Sanae Fujita then addressed the audience. She welcomed the attendees and the speakers invited to the conference as well as the promoters of the conference including the human rights clinic. She then introduced the conference highlighting it as an annual student-led event considered the flagship event of the University of Essex Human Rights Centre. Dr. Fujita then stressed the importance of learning human rights in Asia and the lack of a module that covers this topic in the University of Essex. She stressed the significance of addressing human rights in Asia, considering the region's vast population and numerous challenges. She noted that Asian government's commitment to human rights fell short, evidenced by the comparatively low rate of ratification of major human rights treaties. She also pointed out that the human



rights committee in Asia is not as strong as other regions and the region lacks a regional mechanism of its own, thereby causing Asia to be often neglected in the human rights community as well.



Dr. Fujita then shed some light on how the Human Rights in Asia Conference came to be in the University of Essex. The conference originated from the voices of Asian students in 2009, advocating for a dedicated focus on human rights in Asia. Over time, the conference expanded and attracted notable speakers from diverse backgrounds. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference transitioned to an online event, enabling participation from individuals worldwide.

Alluding to the theme of this year's conference, Dr. Fujita congratulated the student-led committee recognising the diligent efforts of the team and called attention to how colonialism is frequently associated with actions taken by Western nations. She underscored that this was not exclusive to Western nations, as some Asian countries have participated in colonialism, including Japan before and during WW II. Dr. Fujita ended her remarks encouraging the attendees to make the most of the conference and reminded them of the film screening event that was planned.

Prof. Colin Samson then assumed the podium to introduce the topic of the 16<sup>th</sup> edition of Human Rights in Asia Conference. He began by introducing himself and his background. Prof. Samson's primary areas of focus and interest lie within Human Rights, Colonialism and Cultural Diversity. Over the past few years, his research has predominantly centered on indigenous people in North America. He acknowledges the disparity in the human rights of indigenous and other small peoples in Asia.

Prof. Samson then made reference to the parallels that could be drawn echoing the theme 'connecting the dots.' These parallels are as follows.

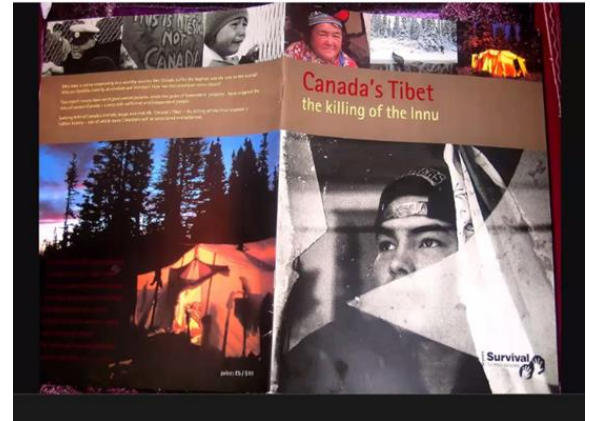
1. Referencing the human rights report 'Canada's Tibet: The Killing of the Innu' by Survival International, an NGO, Prof. Samson recognised some parallels. In the North of Canada there was unilateral confiscation of indigenous land, the erasure of culture through forced assimilation, and an unfair and duplicitous land claims process. These occurrences bore significant similarities to events in Tibet, albeit with a distinction: the actions in Tibet were more directly violent compared to those in Canada.

2. When discussing human rights, the primary conflict arises between local, small, or indigenous communities/groups and the nation-state or states (in certain instances), alongside the commercial interests typically represented by these States. Given the pivotal role of the State, all conversations about human rights inherently carry political mechanisms intertwined with the narrative of their impacts. These political processes often exhibit a colonial dimension, characterized by the colonial initiatives initiated by nation-states.



Prof. Colin then went on to emphasise the importance of the conference and the efforts of the students. He stated that the concern lies in the colonial domination over lands, lives and cultures, manifesting in various forms and recognised the vital role of academic education, which ideally serves as a platform for engaging with the world and effecting change. Education should not only provide knowledge but also inspire action and critical reflection on how to shape the world for the better. A truly

transformative education extends beyond the confines of a classroom. What students and educators benefit from are the stories, perspectives, and experiences of individuals actively engaged in addressing social injustices, such as the representatives from West Papuans, Okinawans, Uyghurs and Rohingya. These individuals, grappling with injustices and crafting strategies to combat them, offer us inspiration and optimism. The insights and stories shared by human rights activists working on the ground are invaluable to our understanding. Prof. Samson accentuated that the conference serves as a platform for forging alliances, demonstrating that we are not alone in our struggle, and emphasizing that addressing injustices necessitates collective action and solidarity.



Prof. Samson concluded his remarks by stressing that at the University of Essex, academic pursuit devoid of action lacks vitality and is sterile. Similarly, academic exploration divorced from the lived experiences and local insights gleaned from specific contexts becomes stagnant. With numerous governments worldwide exhibiting authoritarian tendencies bordering on fascism, and many imposing significant cultural upheavals on indigenous and other marginalized communities, listening to their stories becomes imperative. Their cultures, customs, beliefs, and languages contribute to the vast richness of human diversity in knowledge. In our contemporary world, characterized by complex challenges, we require this diversity of perspectives and ways of knowing more urgently than ever.

### **Keynote Speech**

#### **Ms. Rode Wanimbo**

Rode, Chair of the Women's Department of the Evangelical Church of Indonesia, is a passionate advocate for the liberation of West Papua and the restoration of cultural heritage.

Greeting the audience in her traditional tongue with the words "*Waa waa waa*", Ms. Wanimbo acknowledged the tradition custodian of the motherland on which she lives and works and paid her respects to her elders. Appreciated the conference .

Ms. Wanimbo began her presentation with a short video illustrating the injustices in West Papua and the plight of the internally displaced people (IDPs). Military operations in the region have been ongoing since December 2018, leading to a conflict between the Indonesian National Army and Police and the National Liberation Army of West Papua. This conflict has resulted in approximately 600,000 IDPs from seven different regions, particularly the highlands. In the Dugga regency alone, 317 IDPs have succumbed to malnutrition and poor conditions in temporary shelters. Currently, people are still living in the jungles, surviving on raw vegetation. Women must trek 4-5 hours daily to the nearest river

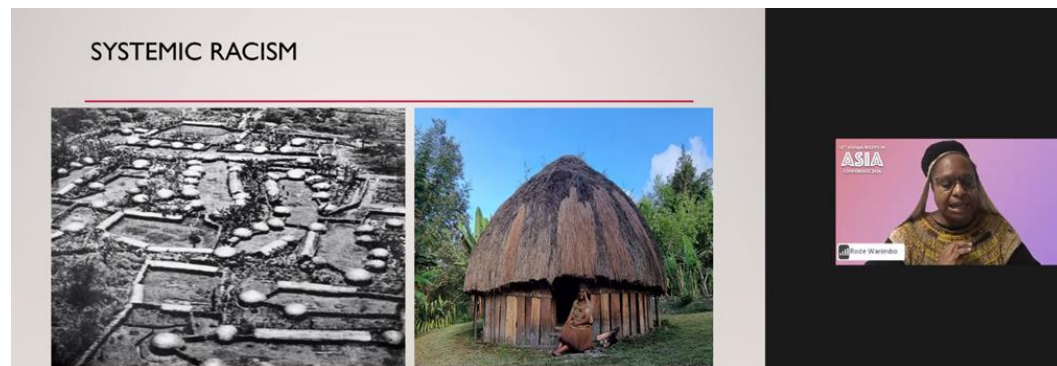


to fetch clean water to ensure the well-being of children and IDPs in shelters. Churches, faith-based organizations, and NGOs are striving to alleviate the situation.

Ms. Wanimbo then delved into the history of the injustices in West Papua. West Papuan indigenous communities are facing the effects of settler colonialism, intricately linked with imperial endeavours in global politics. Within the context of West Papua, three key historical events underscore the political machinations fuelled by economic motives.

**New York Agreement, 1962:** It was initiated during the Kennedy administration with the aim of facilitating the transfer of power over West Papua from the Netherlands to Indonesia. This agreement was reached without any consultation or representation of indigenous West Papuans. The United States had held economic interests in Indonesia since as early as 1920, with American-owned oil and gas companies operating in the region. Sukarno, Indonesia's first president capitalized on the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, leveraging support from the Soviet Union for Indonesia's military operations. This included the *Tri Komando Rakyat* (People's Triple Command), a military operation aimed at invading and annexing West Papua in December 1961.

Business contract between Freeport-McMoRan and the government of Indonesia, 1967: Freeport-McMoRan, the largest gold mining company headquartered in the United States, entered into a business agreement with the Indonesian government to



initiate a mining extraction project without consulting the *Amungme* people. The *Amungme* community is the rightful landowner of *Mount Nemangkawi*, where Freeport operated the Grasberg mine in Indonesian-administered West Papua. This business contract was established two years prior to the United Nations' sanction of the process to determine Papua's political status in 1969.

**Act of Free Choice, 1969:** This legislation left the indigenous people of West Papua with no autonomy, running contrary to the international democratic principle of one person, one vote. Instead of facilitating a comprehensive referendum, only 1026 individuals were consulted out of approximately 800,000 indigenous Papuans at that time. Under the duress of a heavy military presence, these 1026 individuals opted for integration with Indonesia. Regrettably, the United Nations endorsed this flawed process. As a result of this manipulative procedure and the outcome of the Act of Free Choice, numerous protests erupted across various locations. In response to the resistance, the Indonesian government dispatched security forces. Thousands of indigenous West Papuans lost their lives, while others became refugees in Papua New Guinea. Massacres occurred in Biak, Wasior, and other areas of West Papua. Human rights activists were subjected to torture, imprisonment, and extrajudicial killings, with women being subjected to sexual violence by Indonesian security forces. The avarice of the colonizers and the utilization of security forces have led to gross human rights violations, particularly concerning the rights of self-determination for indigenous West Papuans.



Ms. Wanimbo then provided an in-depth discussion on the systemic racism experienced by the people of West Papua. She depicted the traditional Honai home of the Dani tribe, which she herself belongs to, illustrating the longstanding harmony between West Papuans and their natural surroundings. For generations, they have upheld traditional beliefs and values, yet colonizers deemed them uncivilized and sought to impose their own ideals through missions of civilization, as recounted by early Christian missionaries. This led to the displacement of West Papuans from their cultural identity, fostering assimilation. From the indigenous West Papuan perspective, the land, mountains, and oceans hold intrinsic value akin to that of a mother, ensuring survival of all beings. Consequently, the exploitative activities of corporations such as Freeport-McMoRan and British Petroleum are likened to rape on their ancestral land, their mother. Displaced from their original communal settings, they were relocated to unfamiliar homes, while their traditional attire was stigmatized as symbols of poverty and backwardness. Forced assimilation into dominant cultures bred feelings of inferiority among them. The community bears deep collective trauma, compounded by theological teachings that prioritize individual reconciliation with the creator over harmony with nature and fellow creatures.



Ms. Wanimbo then addressed other injustices. The majority of the central government policies exhibit a bias towards migrants, exemplified by initiatives like transmigration. Thousands of individuals from densely populated cities in other provinces of Indonesia are resettled in West Papua. According to the state's narrative, this program aims to teach West Papuans modern farming methods, thereby altering the traditional agricultural practices of their ancestors. Consequently, vast areas of *Sago forest*, the staple food source for West Papuans and coastal communities, have been replaced by oil palm plantations.

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In August 2019, indigenous West Papuan students studying in Java, specifically in Surabaya and Malang cities, protested in commemoration of the New York Agreement. They were met with racist remarks, resulting in intimidation, and prompting around 3,000 indigenous West Papuans to return to West Papua.

Last year, the central government forcefully implemented the creation of three new provinces in West Papua. Indigenous people perceive this move as a "divide and conquer" strategy, as the new provinces will establish additional army barracks and police headquarters. This expansion will increase the presence of security forces while reducing the number of indigenous West Papuans. These policies are encroaching upon their living spaces.

She concluded her presentation by highlighting that the indigenous West Papuan struggle encompasses not only the political right to self-determination but also the protection of their livelihoods, the pursuit of peace and justice, and the safeguarding of the environment.





### Ms. Ai Abe:

Ms Ai Abe Ai is a human rights activist, researcher, and a writer based in Okinawa, Japan. She is a Visiting Researcher at the University of the Ryukyus and serves as secretariat of All Okinawa Council of Human Rights (AOCHR).



Ms. Abe commenced her presentation by expressing her honour at returning as an alumna of the University of Essex. She proceeded to discuss Okinawa, Japan's southernmost prefecture, comprising a collection of small islands centrally positioned within a circle connecting mainland Japan, Korea, China, and Taiwan. Previously known as the Kingdom of Ryukyu, Okinawa was annexed by Japan in 1879. It was among the earliest regions affected by Japanese colonialism, and its legacy persists in the form of structural discrimination, casting a shadow over the human rights of its people.


Delving into Okinawa's history, Ms. Abe outlined a tumultuous narrative spanning from the 19th to the 20th century. Annexation and colonization by Japan were succeeded by militarization, followed by U.S. military occupation. Initially recognized as the Kingdom of Ryukyu, the region saw its monarchy deposed upon annexation, with subsequent suppression of its language and culture. The militarization policy led to land expropriation and environmental degradation. During the Pacific War's final stages, Okinawa was designated as a battlefield between U.S. and Japanese forces, resulting in substantial civilian casualties. The islands remained under U.S. military control until their return to Japan in 1972, yet the burden of U.S. military bases persists.

Ms. Abe then discussed Okinawa's natural wealth, particularly its pristine oceans teeming with coral reefs and biodiversity. Despite its beauty, Okinawa has been plagued by various human rights violations over the past decade. She highlighted three significant challenges:

The destruction of oceans: Ms. Abe presented images of scuba diving in Oura Bay in Henoko, revealing its pristine beauty untouched by development. However, since 2015, the Japanese government has been reclaiming this sea area to construct a U.S. military base. Despite continuous opposition from the people of Okinawa, including a 2019 referendum where over 70% expressed their objection, construction has persisted. While reclamation of the shallow area is complete, efforts to reclaim the deeper parts of Oura Bay are scheduled to commence. Okinawa Prefecture even contested the issuance of reclamation permits in court, arguing that the soft ground in parts of Oura Bay would pose technical challenges for construction. However, the court dismissed Okinawa Prefecture's claim and ordered the issuance of permits. In

### Annexation, assimilation, colonization

- ✦ Kingdom of Ryukyu was annexed by Japan in 1879 with the threat of force, prior to Japan's expansion into Asia
- ✦ Forced deposition of the king and ban on languages and culture - 'imperialisation of Okinawan people'
- ✦ Designated as battlefields at the end of the Pacific War and the loss of 1/4 of population
- ✦ US military occupation from 1945-1972
- ✦ Reversion to Japan and continuous structural discrimination



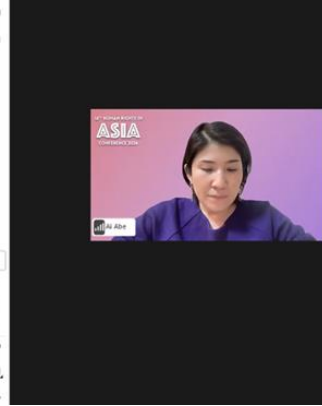
Wikimedia Commons

## Recent human rights issues in Okinawa -1 —Right to self-determination/FPIC principle/Right to environment

- ◆ Land reclamation of Ōura Bay against the will of Okinawan/Ryukyuan peoples for the construction of the US base
- ◆ Failure of Judicial Remedy and forcible substitute execution by the Government



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response, the Japanese government, for the first time in history, executed a substitute permit on behalf of the prefecture in January. Consequently, the Japanese government is advancing with the reclamation and construction of the U.S. military base, disregarding the rights

to self-determination and a clean environment for the people of Okinawa. Additionally, the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) has been ignored.

**PFAS contamination:** Ms. Abe detailed the contamination of water and soil by per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), leading to high concentrations in residents' bloodstreams. PFAS, also known as organofluorine compounds, has been identified as a substance that increases the risk of cancer and poses a threat to children's development. In January 2016, the Okinawa Prefecture announced the detection of high concentrations of PFAS in rivers and other water sources from the Chatan Water Purification Plant, with the U.S. Kadena Air Base presumed to be the contamination source. The firefighting foam used at U.S. military bases for decades contains PFAS. The public announcement revealed that 450,000 residents across seven municipalities, supplied with tap water from the purification plant, had unknowingly consumed contaminated water. Subsequent investigations by the Okinawa Prefecture identified high PFAS concentrations in spring water near U.S. Futenma Air Base, Camp Hansen, Camp Foster, and Camp McTureous. In April 2020, a massive PFAS-containing firefighting foam leak occurred at the U.S. Futenma Air Station. Despite requests from the Okinawa Prefecture government to the U.S. military and Japanese government for soil and water investigations to address contamination, thorough investigations have not been conducted due to the agreement status requiring consent from the U.S. military, which has been denied. Consequently, the Japanese government maintains uncertainty regarding the U.S. military bases' role in PFAS contamination, hindering efforts to implement countermeasures or acknowledge human rights violations. Water intake from the contaminated river, suspended due to confirmed contamination, resumed last month due to drought conditions, albeit with adjustments to meet government provisional target PFAS levels. Daily consumption of PFAS-contaminated drinking water by residents highlights the Japanese government's failure to fulfill its obligation to protect Okinawan people's rights to water, environment, health, and information. Additionally, the U.S. government's disregard for these rights is evident.

**Resumption of Osprey operations:** The Osprey, a U.S. military transport aircraft, which has been flagged for its safety concerns following numerous malfunctions, was globally suspended after a crash in Japan last November resulting in the death of 8 crew members. Despite this, Osprey training has resumed in Okinawa without clarifying the accident's cause or



Oral statement at the UN Human Rights Council by the then Governor of Okinawa (2015)

"Over the past seventy years, U.S. bases have caused many incidents, accidents, and environmental problems in Okinawa. Our right to self-determination and human rights have been neglected.

Can a country share values such as freedom, equality, human rights, and democracy with other nations when that country cannot guarantee those values for its own people?"



implementing measures to prevent recurrence. The Japanese government, citing U.S. law restrictions, has refrained from disclosing the accident's cause or operational plans to the public. Flight operations remain suspended in other parts of Japan due to opposition. This situation underscores the disproportionate and discriminatory risks imposed on the Okinawan people. It highlights the disparity in the Japanese government's response to Okinawan grievances compared to those in other regions. Furthermore, the

failure to safeguard Okinawan people's right to information is evident.

The common thread among all the aforementioned cases is that these human rights violations stem from the presence of US military bases, with the Japanese government either neglecting or exacerbating these violations. In essence, the militarization of Okinawa by both the US and Japan lies behind these transgressions. Approximately 70% of the facilities and areas designated exclusively for US forces in Japan are concentrated in Okinawa Prefecture, despite it comprising only 0.6% of Japan's land area. Additionally, there is a rapid deployment of Japan's self-defense forces in Okinawa. In 2006, Doudou Diéne, the former UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, described the people of Okinawa as a "discriminated minority" in his report following an official visit to Japan. He emphasized the need for an investigation to determine whether the continued presence of US military bases in Okinawa aligns with respecting the fundamental human rights of its people.

Ms. Abe then examined the challenges involved in addressing human rights violations in Okinawa:

Insufficient understanding of historical context: This results in ignorance and skepticism towards the human rights claims of the Okinawan people, contributing to their marginalization and reinforcing structural discrimination. This sentiment is exemplified in the statements of prominent government officials like *Yoshihide Suga*, the former Chief Cabinet Secretary, who, during a contentious discussion with the Okinawan governor, repeatedly referred to Okinawan history, stating, "I was born after the war, so it's hard for me to understand the history of Okinawa." Such ignorance perpetuates discrimination against Okinawans.

Lack of historical education for Okinawan children: This affects the collective identity of the Okinawan people, hindering their ability to assert their rights as both Okinawan and indigenous individuals.

Advocacy through international human rights mechanisms: Despite the failure of domestic laws to adequately address human rights violations, Okinawan people have voiced their concerns through UN human rights mechanisms such as EMRIP (Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), treaty bodies, and special procedures, seeking remedies. While these channels may not always lead to direct redress, the recommendations and communications from these agencies validate Okinawan grievances,

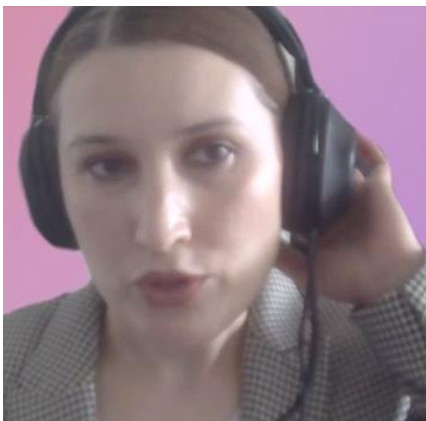
empowering them by affirming the legitimacy of their complaints and highlighting the unjust nature of the current situation.

Ms. Abe concluded her presentation by sharing a portion of an oral statement made by the former Okinawan governor, *Takeshi Onaga*, during a session of the Human Rights Council. Onaga, who fiercely opposed the Japanese government and passed away during his advocacy in 2018, emphasized the impact of US bases in Okinawa over the past seven decades. He highlighted numerous incidents, accidents, and environmental issues caused by these bases, underscoring the neglect of Okinawa's right to self-determination and human rights. Onaga posed a poignant question: "Can a country profess values such as freedom, equality, human rights, and democracy on the international stage when it fails to uphold these principles for its own citizens?" Ms. Abe believes that this unanswered question warrants a response from the Japanese government.

### **Mrs. Maira Aisaeva**

Maira is an Activist, and Chair of the UK Uyghur Community since 2021. She also volunteers at London Uyghur School and is a member of the World Uyghur Congress.

Mrs. Aisaeva began her presentation by sharing her personal connection to the Uyghur community and providing a brief overview of her background, including the challenges her family faced when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) occupied East Turkestan in 1949.



Mrs. Aisaeva then provided some background information on East Turkestan, now known as Xinjiang, which was renamed in 1955. She explained that East Turkestan had declared independence twice, in 1933 and 1944, but lost its autonomy in 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seized control. Over the past 70 years, the region has faced oppression, with massacres occurring as Uyghurs and other minorities resisted CCP rule. The situation escalated significantly in 2015. In 2014, former CCP secretary *Chén Quánguó* visited East Turkestan and noted significant changes since the CCP's occupation. However, in 2015, the Chinese government passed a controversial counterterrorism law to suppress Turkic and Islamic identity expression in the region. This law targeted predominantly Muslim Uyghurs and Turkic minorities who wear hijabs, have beards, and attend mosques. The legislation mandated forced changes in appearance, such as women being required to cut their long skirts and men forced to shave their beards. The law listed 48 offenses, including religious practices like praying five times a day, attending mosques, and fasting during Ramadan. The Chinese government had been constructing concentration camps in rural areas for decades, and they began using these offenses as reasons to detain Uyghurs and other minorities in these camps. From 2016, they started building more camps in urban areas, with satellite images showing graveyards being demolished to make room for new camps with capacities in the hundreds of thousands. Uyghurs, along with Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tartars, and other minorities, have been taken to these camps, where they face interrogation, torture, and even death. Women have been subjected to systematic rape and forced sterilization. The Chinese government has targeted scholars, businessmen, and anyone who does not comply with the new laws, labelling them as extremists and terrorists to justify the suppression of Turkic and Islamic identities under the guise of counter-extremism measures.



Discussing the challenges faced by the Uyghur community, Mrs. Aisaeva explained that since 2016, mass detentions have occurred, preventing Uyghur people from leaving their homes. Their identity cards and passports have been confiscated, with authorities claiming they are stored elsewhere and that individuals must prove their lack of connection to extremist groups to leave. However, this claim is clearly false, as nobody has been allowed to leave since. Families have been separated due to various reasons: communication has been severed, some families have been relocated to mainland China or other areas, and entire families have been detained in concentration camps. Communication is severely restricted, with access to platforms like WeChat monitored, preventing Uyghurs from freely expressing themselves. Homes are equipped with security cameras and require facial recognition for entry, and individuals' DNA and fingerprints have been collected for monitoring purposes. Even within their homes, Uyghurs are subject to surveillance, with temperature sensors used to gauge anxiety levels. If someone's anxiety is deemed high, for any reason, the police will intervene and interrogate them.

Mrs. Aisaeva then detailed the government's efforts to conceal the true state of affairs in the region. Initially, access to the region was heavily restricted. However, in 2021-22, certain "tourists" from specific countries were permitted to enter East Turkestan, purportedly to demonstrate that the region was peaceful and its inhabitants content. Some footage depicts scenes of Uyghur people dancing in the streets, bustling food markets, and traditional attire and music being showcased. However, this portrayal is misleading, as the individuals seen dancing are Chinese, and in the local culture, it is not customary for people to dance in the streets unless it is a festival or a significant occasion.

Discussing religious discrimination, Mrs. Aisaeva noted that approximately 16,000 mosques have been demolished in the region, with only a few prominent mosques spared to give the illusion of their existence to visiting tourists. Many of the larger mosques have been repurposed into bars, and during Ramadan, Uyghur individuals are compelled to consume alcohol. Merely turning on lights in their homes at 4 AM, a common practice for morning prayers, is now interpreted as a sign of religious adherence, resulting in arrests and detention in camps. These oppressive measures have been enforced only since 2016, despite the region being under occupation since 1949.



Mrs. Aisaeva further elaborated on the challenges faced by the Uyghur community. In 2015, the Chinese government reported a Uyghur population of approximately 13.5 million in the region, a figure that significantly understates the actual population, which is estimated to be between 35 and 40 million. Census data regarding the Uyghur population has been compromised or lost. Over three million Uyghurs are currently detained in what are now referred to as re-education camps, where they are subjected to forced labor after undergoing supposed vocational training and language instruction (Uyghur people

predominantly speak the Uyghur language and write in Arabic script). These individuals are also coerced into labor in other regions, including mainland China. Due to restricted access to information and resources, there is little knowledge about the fate of those released from these camps, many of whom succumb to illness while in detention. Those deemed fit for labor are kept alive, while others are administered medication or exposed to diseases, with the intention of causing their death upon release. Inside the camps, there are reports of various types of laboratories where detainees are subjected to medical examinations for organ harvesting. Crematoriums have been constructed to dispose of the bodies of deceased individuals whose organs have been harvested. Concerns about Uyghur organ harvesting have emerged, with Uyghur organs marketed as "Halal organs," leading to increased demand from Muslim-majority countries. The extent and severity of these practices remain largely unknown.

Mrs. Aisaeva wrapped up her presentation by highlighting the facets of colonialism, emphasizing the occupation, settlement, and economic exploitation of the land. The occupation of the region commenced in 1949, while mass settlement efforts began in 2016. Since then, the Chinese government has been relocating its officials from the mainland to the region, with an estimated 7 million Chinese individuals residing there since 2017, either voluntarily or through coercion. The region's abundant resources, including land, petroleum, natural gas, gold, silver, coal, uranium, gas and oil reserves, and 40% of the coral reserves of East Turkestan, are being exploited by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Additionally, approximately 80% of the materials used in solar panels are sourced from East Turkestan. Once an independent country with its own distinct people, appearance, traditions, culture, language, and heritage, the region has now been transformed into a colony of China.

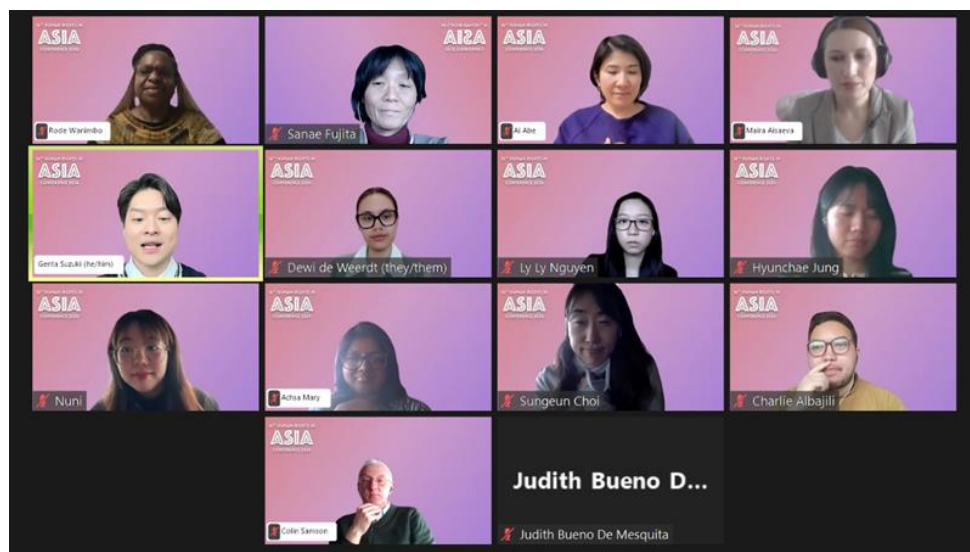
### Panel Discussion

**Moderator** – Prof. Colin Samson

**Panelists:** Ms. Rode Wanimbo, Ms. Ai Abe, Mrs. Maira Aisaeva

The moderator summarized the key points from the three presentations, highlighting common themes. Firstly, they shed light on the shortcomings and superficiality of decolonization efforts. This was exemplified in instances where one state merely transferred power to another, as seen prominently in West Papua. Such transfers were deemed illegal in 1975, following the Western Sahara case where Spain relinquished control of its colony to Morocco and Mauritania. Similarly, in Australia and Canada, power was handed over to British settlers rather than indigenous populations. Annexation, a widespread practice among nation-states, often goes unchecked in the realm of human rights.

Secondly, there was a shared experience of forced assimilation,





particularly stark in the case of the Uyghurs. This is evident in the suppression of local cultures and the denigration of their significance, and most insidiously, in attempts to indoctrinate indigenous or colonized groups with the worldview of the dominant culture.

Lastly, the concept of transmigration was discussed, wherein colonial states facilitate the resettlement and colonization of indigenous lands by other groups.

#### **Question 1 from the audience**

The west Papuan people were made to think that they are inferior . how has this affected their identity and whether it led to conserving culture and reaffirming collective identity.

#### **Ms. Rode Wanimbo**

She affirmed that herself and others in her community grew up with a sense of inferiority. The inability to speak Indonesian, the national language, amidst 250 other tribal languages was a significant factor. Indonesian language education was mandatory in formal schooling, and students were expected to communicate in it; failure to do so often led to feelings of being uncivilized. Consequently, many felt ashamed to wear their traditional attire and lacked a healthy self-image. It wasn't until her university years that she realized the need for change. She began wearing traditional attire to special events and in public spaces, aiming to send a message of inspiration, especially to the younger generation of West Papua, emphasizing that despite their differences in appearance, they are equal.

#### **Question 2 from the audience**

What was the effect, if any, of the UN Office of Human Rights' report in 2022 on Xinjiang?

#### **Mrs. Maira Aisaeva:**

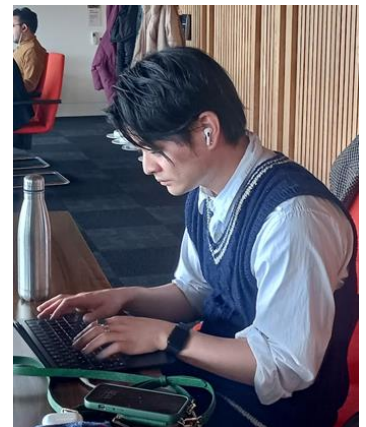
The effect was merely to attract attention so that some advisors would come to the region and check what has been happening. NGOs and other countries supporting the region have been demanding independent advisors to enter the region, conduct their own research, and ascertain the true situation. However, those sent or invited by the Chinese government only provide feedback stating that nothing has been happening and there is no oppression. Uyghurs were coerced into giving interviews stating that they were happily living in the region, thanks to the government taking care of them. In short, it wasn't helpful at all.

#### **Question 3 from the audience:**

Does any of the oppressed people mentioned in the conference have any significant political support from any other country?

#### **Ms. Rode Wanimbo:**

West Papuans struggled to achieve political self-determination, and they received support from Vanuatu, a country in the Pacific.



**Ms. Ai Abe:**

The Okinawa prefectural government established a policy of promoting its own regional diplomacy. Recently, the governor of Okinawa visited Taiwan, the Philippines, China, and Guam to try to establish connections with those regions and countries. However, there has not been any political support from these states.



**Mrs. Maira Aisaeva:**

The United States has been supporting the Uyghurs by raising awareness of the issues, leading to the passage of acts like the Uyghur Labour Act (also known as the Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act), a US federal law aimed at ensuring that American entities do not finance forced labour among ethnic minorities in the region. They strongly agree with the statement that the Chinese government has been committing genocide in the region and crimes against humanity. The independent Uyghur Tribunal held in London also determined that genocide has been occurring in the region and that the Chinese government was committing crimes against humanity. Following the tribunal's verdict, several European countries also showed support, and now countries like the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Kosovo, and Somalia support the Uyghurs in the UN. The president of the World Uyghur Congress, *Dolkun Isa*, has been establishing partnerships with certain governments and visiting groups like the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), which deals with Uyghur and Tibetan issues. A similar group has been established in Dublin. In Germany, there are parliamentary groups working on Uyghur issues as well.

**Question 4 from the audience:**

Can you say a few words on the impact of the Uyghur Tribunal?

**Mrs. Maira Aisaeva:**

The Uyghur Tribunal, established in 2020 and chaired by Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, brought together independent judges and numerous researchers who worked behind the scenes. Thousands of documents were presented by Uyghurs worldwide to provide insight into the situation and the plight of their families back home. All this evidence was gathered, leading to the verdict that China was committing genocide and crimes against humanity. Since then, the cause of the Uyghurs has garnered more attention. It has received increased media coverage, and parliaments of different countries have begun collaborating with Uyghur representatives. NGOs have also become more active, and there has been a shift in lobbying strategies. Consequently, Uyghur activists have been working to encourage certain governments to take legal action, sanction Chinese officials, and enact laws to aid the Uyghur community as a whole.

**Question 5 from the audience:**

Can you explain what re-education is and how can education be used as a tool of assimilation, alienation and dehumanization? What kinds of policies have been implemented by the Indonesian colonisers for re-education?

**Ms. Rode Wanimbo:**

In the West Papuan context, there are 250 tribes and languages, yet they are required to learn Indonesian as the national language. People were prohibited from learning about their own history. When

Indonesia took over West Papua in 1963, all documents about the indigenous West Papuans (stored in the Office of the Arts, Jayapura), which were documented by the Dutch, were burned. Since no documents remain, history is passed down orally from ancestors. They lack the means to learn the names of their rivers and about their national heroes. These are concrete examples. Local indigenous wisdom is not incorporated into the curriculum in West Papua, even though they have special autonomy. They have not been granted the authority to create their own syllabus.

***Moderator's comment:***

One of the common colonial processes implemented by Britain, Belgium, and other countries was to destroy documents when they left, leaving few records of the atrocities they caused. In Britain, this was called Operation Legacy, indicating their concern about their reputation after the end of colonialism.

**Question 6 from the audience:**

Do Uyghurs have any claim to asylum in Western countries such as the UK or EU countries? Is the persecution of the Uyghurs being recognised as a firm basis for asylum?



**Mrs. Maira Aisaeva:**

In the UK, historically, few Uyghurs were granted asylum due to repeated massacres. However, since 2016, there have been records of Uyghurs arriving not directly from East Turkestan but from different countries like Turkey, Egypt, and some Arab countries. The situation of the Uyghurs in Egypt was particularly difficult because there was an order from the Chinese government to detain them and send them back to China. Many Uyghurs in Egypt, Malaysia, and Turkey in the early 90s and 2000s travelled to those countries to study religion and become Imams, intending to return. This was considered a crime by the Chinese government. China's influence on the civilian state of Turkey was significant. There are about 60,000-70,000 Uyghurs living in Turkey, and some of them are monitored, with many being sent back due to CCP orders. In the UK, there aren't many Uyghur refugees, although support is provided to some individuals and families. The largest number of Uyghur refugees are in countries like Norway, Sweden, and Germany. The Canadian government has approved a bill to admit 10,000 Uyghurs to Canada and plans to spend about 350 million dollars on their transfer. They are currently processing applications from more than 30,000 Uyghurs around the world, prioritizing those in critical situations with no documents or status in their current country. Everything is arranged for them to relocate to Canada, and the process will begin soon.

*The moderator inquired whether countries such as Egypt and Turkey were collaborating with the CCP in returning the Uyghurs, and Mrs. Aisaeva responded affirmatively.*

**Question 7 from the audience:**

In terms of the UN systems, what are some of the further expectations that you have of the Global

Human Rights Movement in Okinawa? What would you suggest the education system include to expand the collective identity of Okinawan children?

**Ms. Ai Abe:**

In response to the first question, the Okinawan people and Civil Society Organizations have actively utilized the UN Human Rights system over the past decade. While the communications and reports submitted by Okinawan Civil Society Organizations have led to some recommendations from treaty bodies and special rapporteurs, these recommendations have been largely disregarded by the Japanese government. Consequently, they have had minimal impact on promoting the human rights of the Okinawan people. A closer dialogue between UN bodies and the Japanese government, aimed at helping the government understand the importance of respecting and implementing these recommendations, would have a much greater effect on promoting the human rights of the Okinawan people.

Regarding the second question, numerous recommendations have been made by treaty bodies to incorporate historical and language education, especially Okinawan language education, into the public school curriculum. Preserving languages is crucial for maintaining culture and fostering a sense of collective identity. While some language education classes are offered in elementary schools, and materials have been provided by the Okinawan prefectural government, this is insufficient. The younger generation often lacks proficiency in Okinawan languages and struggles to understand the language spoken by older individuals. Therefore, it is imperative that language and historical education be strongly integrated into public school curricula.

**Moderator's**

**comment:**

I have noticed in my research the activities by indigenous people in the process of cultural revitalization. The indigenous people do this by themselves without relying on the State as they release that their own languages, ways of life, land-based activities are actually what keeps them going and makes them unique as a people. In some circumstances this is very difficult as this ways of life and cultures are suppressed

The moderator concluded the panel discussion with this statement: "Think about what the global human rights movement can do either big or small about this situation."

**Closing remarks at the 16<sup>th</sup> Human Rights in Asia Conference**



The organizing members of the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Human Rights in Asia Conference invited Judith Bueno de Mesquita, senior Lecturer and Director of the Human Rights Centre, Essex Law School, to deliver the closing remarks.

Ms. Judith introduced herself and discussed the colonial history of the UK, echoing Prof. Colin's remarks on the misconception of decolonization. However, she aimed to recognize and highlight the ongoing impacts of the UK's colonial past and its current neocolonialism, which perpetuate inequalities, injustices, and human rights abuses worldwide, particularly in Asia. She emphasized the significance of the conference's theme within the broader human rights context, noting how colonial legacies underlie various human rights issues across Asia,

including the marginalization and repression of certain population groups, as well as ongoing colonial and

neocolonial practices. Ms. Judith also highlighted the role of activism in addressing these injustices across the continent, reflecting on how colonial legacies intersect with other conference themes explored in previous years. She expressed gratitude to the three speakers for their insightful contributions and tireless activism in the fight for human rights and against oppression. She provided a summary of the topics covered by the speakers and offered support and solidarity for their efforts. Additionally, she thanked the student organizers of the conference and Prof. Colin for moderating.

The conference team was presented, and each member shared their thoughts on the significance of the conference. They offered final comments on what the event represents to them. Additionally, the film screening event, which is part of the conference program, was announced.

### **After event presentation at the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Human Rights in Asia Conference**

Unfortunately, Dr. Tin Mar Oo, one of the invited speakers for the conference, was unable to attend in person due to unforeseen circumstances. However, she provided a video presentation discussing the Rohingya people of Myanmar. A segment of her video was screened at the conclusion of the first day of the conference.

Mar Oo, a medical doctor and Rohingya feminist, has dedicated over a decade to initiatives concerning social cohesion, peacebuilding, women's empowerment, and protection in Myanmar's Rakhine state.

### **Dr. Tin Mar Oo**

In her presentation, Dr. Mar Oo discussed the colonial strategy of Divide and Rule. This involved the ethnic categorization and restructuring of Burmese society by the British colonial administration. Ethnic groups were classified based on geographical location, facilitating control and establishing a new ethnic hierarchy distinct from the pre-colonial social order. To streamline governance, preferential treatment was given to certain groups over others, with the majority Burman (Bamar) population receiving less favor compared to Christian ethnic groups and smaller ethnic communities brought in by the British. Native groups were marginalized by the colonial authorities out of fear of potential uprisings. Consequently, ethnic polarization emerged as discriminated groups with strong ethnic identities created tensions among different communities.



In 1897, a distinct communal constituency was established within the legislative council, comprising select members from various ethnic groups. This council became a “Hotbed for Ethnic Debate”, fostering heightened competition among different groups and exacerbating tensions and animosity. Ethnic minorities were disproportionately recruited into armed groups and the military, fuelling resentment towards these minority groups from the ethnic majority.



Dr. Mar Oo highlighted how the colonial legacy and the political perspectives shaped during that time continue to deeply influence the perceptions of the majority Burmese population today. The animosity between different ethnic groups remains significant. The strategy of divide and rule, initially employed by the colonial powers, has been inherited by successive Burman governments after independence and persistently utilized in the post-colonial era. In the pre-colonial period, conflicts were typically between kingdoms rather than ethnicities within Myanmar itself. These conflicts were seldom rooted in social or cultural differences, as each kingdom maintained its own distinct culture and religious practices. However, colonization altered this dynamic, emphasizing ethnicity and religion as central to the social order in Burmese society.



Dr. Mar Oo further delved into the topic of labour migration and shifts in ethnic demographics. Under British rule, the Bamar population fell within the purview of British India, leading to significant migration facilitated by colonial sponsorship. Resentment toward Indians grew due to the perceived favouritism of the colonial administration toward Muslims over the Burman populace, fostering a historical legacy of discrimination and animosity toward descendants of Indian origin in Myanmar. This animosity extends to the Rohingya people, with the majority of Burman harbouring resentment toward them.

During World War II, ethnic groups in Myanmar found themselves divided. Many saw the conflict as an opportunity to pursue their independence aspirations and aligned with either the Japanese or British forces accordingly. The Rohingya, being favored by the British over the Rakhine people, remained loyal to the British, while the Burman and Rakhine populations sided with Japan. Consequently, Rohingya were viewed as outsiders and faced mistrust. This sentiment persists in the Burman consciousness to this day.

Dr. Mar Oo proceeded to underscore the challenges faced by indigenous populations post-independence. Following independence, Burma's modern political movements largely stemmed from its colonial past. The inaugural citizenship law of the independent government in 1948 recognized Rohingya individuals as citizens of Burma, granting them voting rights and representation in the first Burma parliament through four parliamentarians from the Rohingya community. However, the ascent of General Ne Win's regime, following a military coup in 1962, ushered in a traditionalist leadership that viewed individuals of Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani descent as adversaries responsible for the nation's economic struggles. Ne Win enforced traditionalist policies that systematically excluded Rohingya individuals from societal participation. The 1982 citizenship law further marginalized Rohingya people, imposing significant barriers to citizenship and effectively rendering them stateless. Ne Win's national policies disenfranchised Rohingya and other perceived "enemies" from citizenship rights, arbitrarily designating certain ethnic groups as native and reducing the recognized ethnic groups from 147 to 135 without consultation, thereby stripping away the rights and political representation of the excluded groups. Under Ne Win's dictatorship, the government initiated military campaigns such as the Dragon King Operation (*Operation Nagamin*) aimed at eradicating Rohingya communities from Rakhine state. As a result, Rohingya individuals were compelled to seek



refuge in Bangladesh. Upon their repatriation, they encountered movement restrictions and endured human rights violations, prompting further displacement. Presently, Rohingya individuals continue to face systemic marginalization, with limited access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. Deprived of citizenship status and civil documentation, they are denied the right to vote and encounter religious discrimination, including the destruction of mosques and restrictions on practicing their faith. Systemic discrimination permeates various levels of state institutions, exacerbating the plight of the Rohingya population. Rampant communal violence has resulted in the Rohingya losing their traditional lands and being displaced from their ancestral lands forcing them to live as IDPs.

The video was concluded with Dr. Mar Oo asserting that the deep-seated prejudices stemming from historical discrimination, ethnic divisions, and colonial-era events have instilled animosity towards the Rohingya within Myanmar. This animosity persists to the present day and has shown signs of evolving since the military coup in 2021. However, in Rakhine state, the ethnic divide between communities persists, posing significant challenges to social cohesion and casting uncertainty on the future of the Rohingya people.

The speakers expressed their gratitude for the invitation, and the conclusion of day one of the conference was marked.



## Day Two: “Demons in Paradise” Human Rights Centre Film Screening Event

For the first time in the history of the Human Rights in Asia conference, organized under the auspices of the Human Rights Clinic Centre at the University of Essex, a film screening was included as part of the 16<sup>th</sup> edition of the Human Rights in Asia Conference.

The documentary "Demons in Paradise" was shown at Cine 10 in the Lecture Theatre Building of the University of Essex on March 21, 2024, from 5 to 7 PM.

DEMONS IN PARADISE, the result of ten years of work, is where for the first time, a Tamil documentary filmmaker living in Sri Lanka is seeing the Civil war from the inside. The screening was followed by a commentary and Q&A session led by Prof. Lars Waldorf (University of Essex) and Ms. Nirmala Rajasingam.

Nirmala is active with the South Asia Solidarity Group and the Movement for Peoples' Struggles - Sri Lanka (UK). Her political involvements caused her to flee both the Sri Lankan state and the dominant Tamil militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), to lead a life of exile in the UK. Drawing on her distinctive background in political activism within Sri Lanka, Nirmala offered invaluable perspectives during the discussion and provided firsthand insights into the domestic socio-political landscape.

### Film detail:

Sri Lanka 1983, Jude Ratman is five years old. On a red train, he flees the massacre of the Tamils instigated by the Pro-Sinhalese majoritarian government. Now a filmmaker, he takes the same train from South to North. As he advances, the traces of the violence of the 26-year-old war and the one which turned the Tamil's fight for freedom into a self-destructive terrorism pass before his eyes. Reminiscing the hidden souvenirs of fighters and Tamil Tigers, he unveils the repressed memories of his compatriots, opening the door to a new era and making peace possible again.

(Citation: <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/f/demons-in-paradise/> )

Prior to the screening of the film, the moderator provided a brief welcome to the conference's second day and outlined the themes addressed in the film. He discussed the shared aspects of colonialism, highlighting two key elements: the divide and rule strategy, and the forced migration or displacement of populations.

The moderator then provided a succinct overview of the civil war depicted in the movie, highlighting several key points. He noted the absence of violence during the struggle for independence, the discrimination faced by the Tamil minority, and the migration of Sinhalese into traditionally Tamil



territories. Additionally, he mentioned that the film was controversial because it addressed internal conflicts within the Tamil community, including the expulsion of Tamil Muslims by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam).

The moderator then explored the aftermath of the war, discussing topics such as majoritarian democracy and the presence of Buddhist temples in Tamil, Hindu, and Muslim regions. He described the film as a self-reflective piece, wherein the director grapples with the concept of his Tamil identity in post-war Sri Lanka.

Following the screening, questions were directed towards Ms. Nirmala, who participated in the conference remotely via Zoom. Having experienced these events firsthand in Sri Lanka along with her family, Nirmala had valuable insights to share with the audience.



### Q&A Session

#### **Question 1 from Moderator:**

How did the second and third generations, portrayed by the director's son in the film, perceive the ongoing ethnic tension? What are the legacies and aftermaths of these tensions?

#### **Ms. Nirmala Rajasingam:**

There is a certain amount of soul-searching and self-criticism within both communities. The state remains largely nationalist and dominated by the majority. The defeat was significant for the Tamils, resulting in them losing everything. The narrative of Tamil nationalists still persists, fuelled by the ongoing majoritarian state. In the 2022 people's struggle, which succeeded in ousting a highly influential racist president, Sinhalese voters played a crucial role. Activists are collaborating closely. The question now is how to capitalize on these developments.

#### **Question 2 from the audience:**

During the 2022 uprising in Sri Lanka, were the voices of the Tamil community brought up?

#### **Ms. Nirmala Rajasingam:**

Tamil participation was low. They constitute a minority population, and there were transportation difficulties. Extremists also hindered their participation and collaboration with the Sinhalese. The war ended in 2009, and the Tigers were completely dismantled. Commemoration was prevented.

#### **Question 3 from the audience:**

Is a resolution to this ethnic conflict possible?  
If so, what would it look like?

#### **Ms. Nirmala Rajasingam:**

The war ended in 2009, and attention was then shifted to the Muslims. The Tamils have long demanded power sharing and regional autonomy. Sinhala politicians often promise these in exchange for coalition support and votes. The Indo-Lanka Code was mentioned.





The 13th Amendment to the Constitution granted a reasonable degree of regional autonomy to Tamils. Nationalism is a problematic ideology adopted by the colonized population. Before colonialism, there were no rigid identities, and people coexisted. It's important to acknowledge the Tamils and their grievances since independence. Power-sharing is the right of an oppressed minority.

**Question 4 from the audience:**

Is there any evidence to demonstrate British involvement in the intra-Tamil conflict?

**Ms. Nirmala Rajasingam:**

There was no British involvement. British colonialism entrenched rigid ethnic identities that fueled conflict among us. The Tamils were granted a privileged position by the British due to an economic agenda centered around the tea plantations in the South. Sri Lankan Tamils primarily reside in the East and North and remained uninvolved. Alongside nationalist oppression, caste-based oppression also exists. Caste oppression is prevalent within Jaffna. The Tamil Nationalist Movement failed to address these issues, including gender disparities. The intra-Tamil conflict stemmed from hierarchical divisions based on caste, which Tamil nationalists overlooked. This was undemocratic. Militant groups emerged in this environment, claiming sole representation of the Tamils in a fascist manner. They suppressed other voices and imposed tactics like suicide bombings and cyanide capsules. Human rights activists documented these atrocities. Prior to the final conflict, the Tigers eliminated numerous political activists. The issue revolves around armed violence and the right to bear arms under International Law. The Tigers, trained by India, became unaccountable to their people and eradicated rival groups.

The moderator ended the session by emphasizing the importance of assuming moral and political responsibility for our actions.

Prof. Waldorf wrapped up the 16th edition of the Human Rights in Asia Conference by expressing gratitude to all who had participated and contributed to the ongoing success of the conference, with special recognition for those in attendance at the film screening event.



## 16<sup>th</sup> Human Rights in Asia Conference Student Committee

This report is compiled by the organizing team of the conference who are listed below.

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