US sacrificed Papua to court Suharto
By Jim Lobe

WASHINGTON, DC - On the 35th anniversary of the so-called "Act of Free Choice" (AFC) that resulted in West Papua's annexation by Indonesia, newly declassified documents revealed that the administration of the late US president Richard Nixon was unwilling to raise any objections to the process despite its assessment that the move was overwhelmingly opposed by the Papuan people.

The documents, released by the independent Washington-based National Security Archive (NSA) on Friday, show that Washington's Cold War courtship of General Suharto, who had come to power in a military coup d'etat in 1966 and ruled Indonesia with an iron fist until his ouster in 1998, was considered a much higher priority than a plebiscite on independence, "which would be meaningless among the Stone Age cultures of New Guinea", according to a memo sent by then-national security adviser Henry Kissinger to Nixon on the eve of a meeting with the Indonesian strongman in Jakarta in June 1969. The presidential trip coincided with the AFC voting by which Indonesia legitimized its annexation of the territory of West Irian, now known as West Papua - the western half of the South Pacific island of New Guinea.

The province was annexed from the Dutch in 1969 and renamed Irian Jaya (West Irian) under Suharto. The area was granted limited autonomy in 2001, and in 2002 the provincial government adopted the name West Papua for the province. The eastern half of the island comprises the independent nation of Papua New Guinea.

"You should tell [Suharto] that we understand the problems they face in West Irian," wrote Kissinger, who advised Nixon not to bring up the subject on his own lest Washington be more closely identified with a process it knew to be flawed.

The newly released documents, which consist of 11 diplomatic cables and memoranda concerning West Papua from February 1968 through the end of the United Nations-sponsored AFC in August 1969, confirm that Washington was most concerned at the time about Indonesia's support for US policy in Vietnam and elsewhere in Southeast Asia and saw in Suharto a key ally, despite Jakarta's official non-alignment policy.

Suharto is described in the Kissinger cable as a "moderate military man ... who, although indecisive by outside standards, is committed to progress and reform".

The cables related to West Papua, now Indonesia's largest province, are also remarkably similar in tone to another batch released by the NSA in 2001 on the reaction of Kissinger and former president Gerald Ford to Indonesia's planned 1975 invasion
of East Timor, a Portuguese colony in the Malay Archipelago that had recently declared itself independent.

When Suharto asked for Ford's "understanding" for the East Timor invasion, according to one secret memorandum cable, Ford replied, "We will understand and not press you on the issue. We understand the problem and the intentions you have."

Kissinger, who accompanied Ford on his trip to Indonesia in December 1975, prior to the invasion, is reported to have told Suharto, "It is important that whatever you do succeeds quickly," assuring him that if the East Timor invasion went forward, "we will do our best to keep everyone quiet until the president returns home."

Suharto launched the invasion immediately after Ford left Jakarta and annexed the territory the following year. Over the next several years, as many as one-third of the estimated 750,000 East Timorese died or were killed in counter-insurgency operations by Indonesian forces.

When Suharto was ousted almost a quarter of a century later, however, East Timorese voted overwhelmingly for independence in a 1999 referendum, and, despite retaliatory action by the Indonesian military, which destroyed much of the territory's infrastructure, achieved formal independence last year after a transition period overseen by the United Nations.

Like the East Timorese, West Papuans have maintained a low-level insurgency against Indonesian rule since the territory's annexation. Unlike East Timor, however, West Papua became a key focus of the regime's transmigration schemes, so that Javanese living in West Papua currently outnumber the indigenous population.

In addition, the California-sized territory holds important natural resources, particularly gold, other minerals and timber, which have drawn considerable investment from both Indonesian and Western, including US, companies that are used to dealing with authorities in Jakarta.

The newly released documents show that Washington was well aware in 1969 that the vast majority of the estimated 800,000 Papuans opposed annexation by Indonesia, largely because of the violence and repression committed by Indonesian troops that had occupied the former Dutch territory since 1962.

Indeed, the US ambassador in Jakarta at the time, Frank Galbraith, wrote in one memo on July 9, 1969, that "possibly 85-90%" of the population "are in sympathy with the Free Papua cause". He also noted that Indonesian military operations, which had resulted in the deaths of possibly thousands of civilians, "had stimulated fears and rumors of intended genocide among the Irianese".

The AFC, which was endorsed unanimously by 1,022 "representatives" of the Papuan population who were hand-picked by Jakarta, was administered and controlled entirely by Jakarta.

The Act was carried out pursuant to a US-brokered 1962 agreement between the Netherlands and Indonesia that awarded control of what was then called West New Guinea to Jakarta subject to its agreement to carry out an election on self-determination, in which all adult Papuans were to be eligible to vote, no later than 1969. Once in control, however, Jakarta quickly moved to repress the independence movement.

And if Washington ever intended to hold Jakarta to its pledges about the election process; that sentiment dissipated after Suharto took power in 1966, initiating the killings of an estimated 500,000 suspected communists, and installing economic reforms designed
to promote foreign investment. Indeed, the first company to take advantage of a new foreign investment law was the US mining company Freeport Sulphur, which won concessions over vast tracts of land in West Papua. The company, which became Freeport-McMoRan, has been operating the world's biggest open-pit gold mine in West Papua for some three decades.

Although the UN's observer at the time reported serious violations of the self-determination process - and 15 countries strenuously contested the AFC's validity - the UN General Assembly "took note" of the AFC's results, in effect recognizing Indonesia's annexation.

Almost all of the secret US cables assumed, whether explicitly or implicitly, that Jakarta itself would never accept any outcome other than annexation. One telegram sent early in the six-week AFC period compares the exercise to "a Greek tragedy, the conclusion preordained. The main protagonist, the [government], cannot and will not permit any resolution other than the continued inclusion of West Irian in Indonesia.

"Dissident activity," the author predicts, "is likely to increase, but the Indonesian armed forces will be able to contain and, if necessary, suppress it."

Kissinger himself appeared to understand the fraud, stressing to Nixon that "you should not raise this issue" because "we should avoid any US identification with that act".

At the same time, US officials were doubtful whether even a free plebiscite would make any sense. One 1968 telegram from US Admiral Marshall Green in Jakarta stresses that "we are dealing here essentially with Stone Age illiterate tribal groups" and that "free elections among groups such as this would be more of a farce than any rigged mechanism Indonesia could devise". At another point Green expresses concern that the UN special representative for West Irian, Ortiz Sanz, might not be sufficiently aware of these "political realities" and should be "made aware" of them.