

NEWSLETTER | AUGUST 2026

Yumi Tugeta: You and I Together

Honoring Vanuatu's spirit of Melanesian solidarity with West Papua, Kanaky, and the wider Pacific

West Papua Campaign USA | Vanuatu Independence Day Celebration | Legion Park, Everett, Washington

Dr. Méré Tari-Sovick shared reflections on Vanuatu's history, identity, and the Melanesian responsibility to remember those who are still not free.



A people who are already free can still choose to remember those who are not.

AT A GLANCE

Event: Vanuatu Independence Day Celebration

Location: Legion Park, Everett, Washington

Attendance: Around 25 to 30 community members

Hosted by: West Papua Campaign USA

In partnership with: Melanesian Women Today and Fiji Women Association

A Community Gathering with a Deep Message

On Saturday, August 1, West Papua Campaign USA gathered with community members at **Legion Park in Everett, Washington** to celebrate **Vanuatu Independence Day**.

The event was hosted by **West Papua Campaign USA** in partnership with **Melanesian Women Today** and **Fiji Women Association**. Around **25 to 30 people** joined together for an evening of community, reflection, *wetem storian*, *tok stori*, *talanoa*, *music*, *aelan kaka*, and Melanesian solidarity.

It was not a large event, but it carried a deep message.

For West Papuans, Vanuatu Independence Day is more than a celebration of another Pacific nation. It is a reminder that a people who are already free can still choose to remember those who are not. It is a reminder that freedom, in the Melanesian way, is not only for one island, one nation, or one generation. Freedom is something we carry together.



Community members gathered at Legion Park in Everett, Washington, for Vanuatu Independence Day, hosted by West Papua Campaign USA in partnership with Melanesian Women Today and Fiji Women Association.

Why this matters

This newsletter is both a reflection and a thank you. It honors the Ni-Vanuatu spirit of solidarity, remembers the history that shaped it, and invites Pasifika communities to carry that same consciousness for West Papua, Kanaky, and all peoples still seeking freedom.

A Reflection Led by Dr. Méré Tari-Sovick

We were honored to hear reflections from **Dr. Méré Tari-Sovick**, a Melanesian women's leader, Indigenous rights advocate, researcher, Founder and Executive Director of **Melanesian Women Today**, and Interim Executive Director of the **Pacific Peoples' Partnership**.

Through her reflection, Dr. Méré helped our community understand Vanuatu not only as a country that gained independence, but as a people who reclaimed their name, their land, their identity, and their responsibility to the wider Melanesian family.

She reminded us that when we talk about the Pacific, we cannot ignore those who are still not liberated. That consciousness, she shared, is part of the Melanesian way.

From New Hebrides to Vanuatu

Before independence, Vanuatu was known by the colonial name **New Hebrides**. British explorer James Cook gave the islands that name after visiting during his second voyage in 1774. Vanuatu later became a joint British and French colony under the Anglo-French Condominium system before gaining independence on **July 30, 1980**.

Vanuatu's journey to independence was not only about a change of flag or government. It was also about reclaiming dignity, land, culture, and the right of Ni-Vanuatu people to stand as themselves.

Dr. Méré explained the name **Vanuatu** through two words: **Vanua**, meaning land or place, and **Tu**, meaning to stand. In that meaning, Vanuatu carries a powerful message: a land and a people standing on their own.

For West Papuans, this meaning touches something very deep. Our struggle is also about land. It is about identity. It is about culture. It is about the right of Indigenous people to stand freely on their own ancestral land.

The Power of YUMI

This year's 46th Independence celebration in Vanuatu carried the theme "**Vanuatu, YUMI Build Tugeta.**" The theme reflects unity as a nation and the importance of working together to build a stronger future.

That word **YUMI** is powerful.

**It is not only 'me.'
It is not only 'you.'
It is we.**

Dr. Méré reminded us that YUMI is central to who the people of Vanuatu are. It carries the spirit of you and me together. It speaks to community, shared responsibility, and collective strength.

Vanuatu is an archipelago of **83 islands**, with many communities, languages, and local identities. Yet through the spirit of **YUMI**, the message is clear: many islands, many people, but one shared responsibility to stand and build together.

This is the same spirit that West Papuans need. This is also the spirit that the wider Pacific needs.



The Vanuatu flag and the Morning Star flag stand together as symbols of Melanesian solidarity and the shared hope for freedom.

A Free Nation That Still Remembers the Unfree

One of the most powerful things about Vanuatu is that independence did not make its people forget others.

Instead, Vanuatu's freedom story became connected to the freedom of other Melanesian peoples.

Vanuatu's founding leaders understood that colonialism did not end everywhere at the same time. Some Melanesian peoples became free, while others continued to live under colonial rule, military control, land dispossession, and the denial of self-determination.

This is why Vanuatu has continued to be an important voice for West Papua and Kanaky.

The late **Father Walter Lini**, Vanuatu's first Prime Minister, is remembered for carrying a vision of Melanesian solidarity. The Melanesian Spearhead Group describes how Lini used the ideas of Melanesian Socialism and Melanesian Solidarity to rally support for the Kanak people of New Caledonia, the people of East Timor, and West Papuans in their struggles for self-determination and independence.

That is why Vanuatu's solidarity is not just a slogan. It comes from history. It comes from political memory. It comes from a Melanesian understanding that one people's freedom is connected to the freedom of others.

Solidarity in Action

Vanuatu has not only spoken about solidarity. Over the years, its leaders, people, churches, chiefs, and civil society have helped keep the struggles of West Papua and Kanaky alive in regional and international spaces.

The **Melanesian Spearhead Group** was first established through an informal meeting in Goroka, Papua New Guinea, in 1986, attended by leaders from Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and a representative of the FLNKS of New Caledonia. The group was built around a shared desire for the decolonization and freedom of Melanesian peoples still under colonial rule.

Vanuatu has also used international spaces to raise West Papua. In a statement at the United Nations in 2002, Vanuatu requested that the case of West Papua be placed before the UN Decolonization Committee, also known as the Committee of 24.

Vanuatu has also supported West Papuan unity work. In December 2014, a historic gathering of West Papuan leaders in Vanuatu brought different factions together to form the **United Liberation Movement for West Papua**.

These actions matter.

They show that Vanuatu's solidarity is not only emotional. It is diplomatic, regional, political, cultural, and spiritual. It is a long-standing commitment to remember those still seeking freedom.



The gathering included aelan kakaë, conversation, and community connection in the Melanesian way.

What This Means for West Papua

For West Papuans, Vanuatu's support is deeply meaningful.

When Vanuatu speaks about West Papua, it tells our people that we are not forgotten.

When Ni-Vanuatu leaders remember West Papua and Kanaky, they remind the Pacific that independence should not end with national celebration. Independence should also create responsibility.

When Vanuatu stands with West Papua, it shows what true Pacific solidarity can look like: not charity, not pity, but family remembering family.

This is why West Papua Campaign USA is deeply grateful to the people of Vanuatu.

Your solidarity gives hope to West Papuans in the diaspora. It gives courage to those who continue to speak, organize, educate, and advocate. It reminds us that even though West Papua's struggle is long and painful, we are not carrying it alone.

An Inspiration for Pasifika

Vanuatu's example should inspire every Pasifika nation and community.

The Pacific is often spoken about through culture, dance, food, music, ocean, and celebration. These are beautiful and important. But Dr. Méré's reflection reminded us that Pacific identity must also carry consciousness.

To be Pasifika is not only to celebrate who we are. It is also to remember who is still suffering.

Who in our region is still not free?

Who is still being silenced?

Whose land is still being taken?

Whose people are still asking to be seen?

Vanuatu teaches us that a free people should not become comfortable and forget others. A free people should become stronger in love, stronger in memory, and stronger in action.

That is the lesson we hope every Pasifika community can carry forward.

Our Thank You to Vanuatu

To the people of Vanuatu: **tank yu tumas.**

Thank you for continuing to stand with West Papua.

Thank you for remembering Kanaky.

Thank you for carrying the spirit of Melanesian liberation beyond your own shores.

Thank you for showing us that freedom is not complete when it is kept only for ourselves.

**Your history inspires us.
Your courage strengthens us.
Your solidarity reminds us that West Papua is not forgotten.**

May the spirit of **YUMI** continue to guide us.

May Melanesia and the wider Pacific continue to stand together for land, dignity, culture, identity, justice, and self-determination.

Yumi wantok. West Papua is not forgotten. Papua Merdeka.

Source Notes

This newsletter is based on community reflections shared at the Vanuatu Independence Day Celebration at Legion Park and on public sources checked for historical context.

Vanuatu Tourism Office - background on Vanuatu history, James Cook's naming of New Hebrides, and Vanuatu's cultural diversity.

Vanuatu Business Review - 2026 46th Independence celebration theme: "Vanuatu, yumi build tugeta."

Melanesian Spearhead Group Secretariat - MSG history, the 1986 Goroka meeting, and Father Walter Lini's Melanesian solidarity vision.

United Nations General Debate statement by Vanuatu, 18 September 2002 - Vanuatu's request that West Papua be discussed before the Committee of 24.

United Liberation Movement for West Papua and Free West Papua Campaign - background on the December 2014 formation of ULMWP in Vanuatu.

Melanesian Women Today and Pacific Peoples' Partnership - public biography and leadership information for Dr. Méré Tari-Sovick.