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## Submission to the Working Group on Human Remains

Professor Norman Palmer, Chairman  
Working Group on Human Remains  
Cultural Property Unit  
Department for Culture, Media and Sport  
2-4 Cockspur Street  
London SW1Y 5DH  
United Kingdom

Dear Chairman,

I would like to thank the Working Group for inviting me to make a submission on the subject of human remains and their treatment in publically funded museums and galleries in the United Kingdom.

My submission relates to a small quantity of cranial material held in the collection of the Natural History Museum. The manner in which these skulls were collected in 1912-1913 from what was then Dutch New Guinea contravened accepted mores and professional practice at the time. Heads were removed from individuals who had died of disease near a British expedition camp, without the permission of relatives. Knowing that they were in the wrong, the collectors were subsequently deliberately silent on the manner in which they had acquired these skulls. There is no indication, however, that staff of the British Museum or the Natural History Museum were at any time aware of the actual circumstances of acquisition. A copy of a published report on the circumstances of collection, and the current location and accession details of the skulls, is appended to this submission.<sup>1</sup>

The individuals whose skulls were collected belonged to the Amungme community in what is now West Papua / Irian Jaya (Republic of Indonesia). Public display of, or

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<sup>1</sup> Published as: Chris Ballard, 2001, 'A.F.R. Wollaston and the "Utakwa River Mountain Papuan" skulls.' *The Journal of Pacific History*, 36(1): 117-126.

trade in human remains is not and has never been countenanced by the Amungme. The community can still recall the circumstances of collection, and feels strongly that the remains should be returned for reburial. I have been asked by the Chairman of the Amungme Foundation, Mr. Tom Beanal, to approach the Natural History Museum with a request that the skulls be de-accessioned and unconditionally returned to the Amungme community.

I should also note that the Amungme community, who are landowners of the area around the notorious Freeport mine, have been subjected to numerous and grave human rights abuses since 1967 at the hands of the Indonesian military. As a result, they are wary of seeking support from Jakarta on this matter. The Amungme identify this earlier theft of ancestral skulls as the first chapter in a long history of human rights abuse.

I would strongly recommend that the Museum of Natural History enter into negotiation with the Amungme community to discuss the scope for de-accessioning and restoring the skulls to the community at the earliest possible opportunity. I would also welcome the support and advice of the Working Group on this matter, and would like to take this opportunity to thank the Working Group for their concern for the broader issues of which this case forms a small but significant instance.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Ballard

cc.

Mr. Tom Beanal, Amungme Foundation (LEMASA), Timika  
Mr. John Rumbiak, ELSHAM, Jayapura