Papua New Guinea: Indigenous peoples lose their rights to investors

We are witnessing a global process of agribusiness expansion and land grabbing in the South. Through lease, concession, even purchase, corporations or foreign states take over large areas of farmland on a long-term basis to produce staple foods or agrofuels for export. It is estimated that roughly 1,000 investment groups have targeted more than 50 countries in Asia, Oceania, Africa and Latin America (1).

For that to happen, large quantities of money are mobilised, trade deals are closed and legal amendments are needed to create the infrastructure that will allow private appropriation of the land that in many southern countries is still managed by communities through their traditional systems.

Within this framework IRIN reported (2) that on 28 May, Papua New Guinea's parliament amended sections of the Environment and Conservation Act 2000, which rules on major resource projects in the country. The amendments give the director of the Office of Environment and Conservation wide power to authorize environmental plans submitted by investors. The authority granted is so broad that the director's final decision "may not be challenged or reviewed in any court or tribunal, except at the instigation of an Authorization Instrument".

The amendment has wide range implications for some six million people's rights to land and environment protection. For many years Papua New Guineans could individually or under customary rights protect their land sueing or claiming compensation in case of environmental damage. Now, with the amendments, they have lost such rights.

Papua New Guinean indigenous groups have long struggled for their land and environmental rights. In 1997, 1989 and 1999 people were killed when confronting the mining activities of Freeport-Rio Tinto in Bougainville and Ok Tedi copper mines (see WRM Bulletin Nº 7). IRIN reports that more than 5,000 people then lost their lives.

Apart from mining, logging operations have destroyed or degraded forests with harmful impacts on forest dwellers. And more recently, another pressure has been added on forests and forest people: large scale oil palm plantations promoted by World Bank loans, that have increased in a country where 97% of the land is communally owned and most of its 6 million population still lives in the rural area and rely on subsistence farming for their livelihoods (see WRM Bulletin Nº 40).

Within this context the new amendments depriving local people from their rights to protect their land seem quite convenient for the corporations' quest for new territories.

We know the high cost: increasing poverty due to destruction of livelihoods, land concentration and displacement, loss of food sovereignty for local communities, more carbon emissions from both deforestation and industrial agrobusiness. Such is the expensive cost of the global trade architecture. Who will be accountable for the destruction?

(1) "Land grabbing and the global food crisis," GRAIN,

November 2009,http://www.grain.org/o_files/landgrabbing-presentation-11-2009.pdf
(2) “PAPUA NEW GUINEA: Indigenous people lose out on land rights,” IRIN,http://www.irinnews.org/PrintReport.aspx?ReportId=89322