
Papua New Guinea: Environmental groups urge Primer Minister to take action against logging project

Several PNG and Pacific Groups, Australian Groups and International Groups have published a sign-on letter addressed to the Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, Sir Michael Somare, raising their "deep concern and increasing frustration over the current state of governance in Papua New Guinea's forests sector and its debilitating impact on the economy and security of the Nation", presenting evidence that uphold their concern, and calling on the government to act.

One of the conflictive issues is the handling of the Kiunga-Aiambak affair (see WRM Bulletins 55 and 53). A Timber Authority was issued to a local company that had been contracted to build a road between the provincial centres of Kiunga and Aiambak in Western Province. That company then sub-contracted the work to Concord Pacific, a logging company owned and operated by Malaysian interests. It was soon apparent that the road project was simply an excuse to obtain a large logging concession through the back door. Later in 1994, Concord Pacific obtained a five-year extension and permission to harvest up to 210,000 cubic metres annually, making it one of the largest logging operations in PNG.

The landowners of Kiunga Aiambak have lost their land and forest resource to a profit-greed Malaysian company in return for ... what? Arnold Kombo, Community leader of Nangumarum, East Sepik Province, tells: "They were doing logging where so much destruction was done with trucks making feeder roads. There was destruction like trees cut down unnecessarily, small trees and vegetation cleaned up, eventually leaving the land barren and then having grasses growing instead of trees. In places the water sources became dry and people had to go so far away to look for water." Also Sister Yatamara, Sister in charge of Baboa Health Centre says: "Nobody cares about this place, we are forgotten people here and government has not given us any services. Before people said they could see fish in the water, they comb their hair by seeing themselves in the water. Now you can see the water is really muddy and when people go to the sago place there is no clean water, so they drink water there and get sick, they get gastric pain, blood, these people are very, very sick".

In 1999 the PNG Government made a half-serious attempt to halt illegal logging along the Kiunga-Aiambak road. Court action ensued, with many delays. Meanwhile, logging along the road --and far into the forest-- continued unimpeded.

In December 2002, a Deed of Settlement was filed in the National Court. The Deed purports to legitimise continuing unlawful exploitation of resources and would impact on the Sovereignty of Papua New Guinea and the rights of its people. In the last few days the Forest Minister has declared that the Kiunga- Aiambak road is "definitely illegal" and stated that the government's position is clear, "we will not execute the Deed of Settlement" and they would "immediately terminate the Kiunga-Aiambak timber authority".

The signing organisations urge the Primer Minister to fulfil the government's statements and take effective action. They suggest some measures that are well within the government's scope:

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- * Overturn the Deed of Settlement either through the courts, by legislation, or any other means at your disposal.
 - * Ensure that there is a independent investigation of all those who have been involved in this corrupt deal and prosecution of those who are implicated in any criminal acts.
 - * Halt all operations of Concord Pacific and have them removed from Papua New Guinea.
 - * Ensure that the Timber Authority is not allocated to any other company.
 - * Ensure that no extension of the road project is approved, legally or otherwise.

"AusAID has recently recognised the concept of a lost decade in the development of PNG due to corruption and mismanagement. The matters above clearly show the pivotal role of the logging industry in causing this loss. Unless the Government shows resolve and gets tough then we will see another lost decade", warns the letter. (see full letter at: www.wrm.org.uy/countries/PapuaNG/PNGletter.rft)

Article based on: "Open letter to The Right Honourable Sir Michael Somare. Subject: Forest sector and Kunga Aiambak Road Deed of Settlement", sent by Stephen Campbell, Greenpeace, e-mail: stephen.campbell@au.greenpeace.org ; "Logged out, paradise lost", http://www.paradiseforest.org/paradise_lost/kiunga_aiambak_road.php