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## Papua New Guinea: Forests saved against logging and oil palm plantation

Landowners of Maisin and Wanigela customary lands, in the Collingwood Bay area of Oro Province, have something to celebrate.

In May 2002, the Waigani National Court returned customary land which had been leased to the State in early 1999 under a lease-lease back agreement by Keroro Development Corporation, a local landowner company. The plan was to clear the area and plant oil palm trees. The land concerned comprises 38,000 hectares of rich volcanic soil with an extensive forest area.

The Collingwood Bay people considered illegal the 'lease' on their land so they mounted a test case to determine whether the rule of law and justice can be flouted by logging companies, their agents and corrupt individuals in government.

According to the majority of landowners only a few signed the land lease, without proper consultation with various customary landowners in Collingwood Bay. The court victory did away with the threat of logging and conversion to monoculture oil palm plantations of those lands where their landowners can develop self-managed small scale, community based enterprises without destroying their forests.

This case can be also seen as an encouragement for other landowners who are facing similar problems to reclaim land which has been seized without their consent, and to assert their right to be included in all discussions concerning the usage of their land. Kuinga-Aimbak landowners in the Western province, for example, are also fighting to stop logging operations in their area.

The victory gave way to a four day celebration and the occasion was attended by friends from within PNG and overseas who had assisted landowners in their long battle, like Greenpeace, Environmental Law Center and Conservation Melanesia. Guests were showered with gifts from all the villages and a traditional ceremonial of wiping pork fat on the guests as mark of respect and in payment of their support.

"Unlike our ancestors and forefathers who fought battles with spears and clubs, we fought this battle with pen and paper, as our land was stolen through pen and paper", said a Collingwood Bay landowner.

Although the outcome was in their favour, the whole ordeal has been hard for them and has permanently changed their lives. They had to bear the expensive costs of the legal suit and had to take decisions that affected their families' security and welfare and to a greater extent caused them dear lives.

Article based on information from: "Landowners celebrate reclaimed land", Raymond Palangat, Conservation Melanesia

