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## Papua New Guinea: Guns, drugs and logging in a disappearing paradise

Ninety seven percent of the land area of Papua New Guinea still is customary land owned by the people, who voluntarily give 3% to the government to build schools and other public buildings. This lush land with more than 700 recognised culturally and physically distinct peoples, each with their own language and traditional culture, used to have traditional landowners exercising sustainable forest management with little interference from outside.

More recently, foreign companies entered the country to carry out massive industrial logging, primarily for round-log exports. More than 10% of the forest resource, some 300,000 square kilometres, was lost between 1975 and 1996. PNG Forest Watch carried out an assessment in June 2001 which concluded that overseas logging companies continue to ravage the forests, destroying everything in their path to grab the most valuable logs that are then shipped abroad to be processed.

An Independent Review Team was established in November 2000, to look at all new proposals for logging concessions. It found wide-spread evidence of political interference, usually by ministers, and repeated failure to follow due process and to comply with the law of the land. There are even suggestions of uncovered corruption, including fraud and forgery on the part of politicians and bureaucrats.

PNG Forest Watch is calling for a high level inquiry into alleged links between logging companies and the illegal trade in guns and drugs. This follows Acting Police Commander in North Fly, Senior Inspector Hariba Mamaea's comments that people are traveling from Komo through Nomad River to the Binge log camp to trade drugs for high-powered firearms suspected of being brought in from Australia via Daru.

Local police reportedly call the logging camp a "free trade zone" because of the smuggling activities being carried out there. The Binge logging camp is believed to be operated by the logging company Concord Pacific, that was criticised in the recent Independent Forestry Review in the following terms: "This project is in breach of the National Forest Policy and the current provisions of the Forestry Act ...The project cannot be considered to be a forestry project in any proper forest management sense." (Individual Concession Report No.31, October 2001, page 1)

Concord Pacific is also the company closely associated with a Mr Philip Lee who was reported in the Post Courier and The National newspapers last year to have been deported from PNG when he was found to be in possession of five different passports including three PNG passports. Later Mr Lee was allowed back into the country where he has remained despite a Court Order upholding the deportation order. Last week it was revealed that the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who shares some business interests with Mr Lee, had failed to act on legal advice that Mr Lee should be deported.

That connection and the support that Mr Lee has received from the party in government, would explain why the current Minister for Forests has made at least two attempts to give special tax relief to Concord Pacific, a company in which Mr Lee is a shareholder and the general manager. It would also explain the fact that the Minister has totally ignored the provisions of the Forestry Act in

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attempting to grant Concord Pacific the right to clear the forest for a 'trans Highland highway' and the fact that the government has failed to pursue litigation started in 1999 by the Forest Authority against Concord Pacific for illegal logging.

Additionally, the close association between Concord Pacific and high level government officials appears to shed light on why the government has also failed to act on the recommendations of last year's Independent Forestry Review, that found that the company's Kiunga Aiambak operation was is "in breach of the National Forest Policy and the current provisions of the Forestry Act". The Review recommended that "Court action should be taken forthwith" and "if at all legally possible this project should be shut down and assets seized to reimburse the landowners for their loss".

"The Prime Minister must come out and fully explain his Minister's actions and reveal the full extent of the links between his party and Mr Lee" says PNG Forest Watch. "He should also explain his government's failure to act on the many reports of wrongdoing by the company".

Article based on information from: PNG Forest Watch, "Forest Management in Papua New Guinea - An assessment by PNG Forest Watch", 9th June 2001; "NGO Report Critical of Forestry Review", Papua New Guinea Eco-Forestry Forum, 22nd January 2001; "Illegal Guns, Drugs and the Logging Industry", 29 January 2002, [http://www.ecoforestry.org.pg/press\\_releases.html](http://www.ecoforestry.org.pg/press_releases.html) "Forest watch calls on PDM to explain links to logging company", 20 February