
Papua New Guinea: From Australia with cyanide

Indiscriminate logging has been the main cause for the decline of Papua New Guinea's rainforests, that the government has been unable to stop in spite of the announced moratorium on the activities of timber companies. Unfortunately, this is not the only depredatory economic activity that affects the country's forests. Mining is also producing important impacts at the local level. For example, Freeport-Rio Tinto's mining operations at Ajkwa River's watershed has had severe effects on the environment and the level of mercury in this river is four-times higher than the maximum allowed. Local communities are strongly opposing this kind of activities as well as the attempts of Freeport to bribe them with "development" projects (see WRM Bulletin 7).

A new case of pollution produced by a mining source was recently denounced. Responsible is the Australia-based company Dome Resources. Last March a box containing 150 kg of sodium cyanide balls fell accidentally from a helicopter of the company, which was flying from Port Moresby to the mine of Tolukuma, and ended in the deep forest. Even if the company tried to minimize the potential effects of the accident by announcing that 70% of the balls were recovered, it is clear that the impact of the cyanide drop on the hydrographic network has been very important. Professor Kirpal Singh of PNG University warned that cyanide completely spoils freshwater, making it useless for drinking and as habitat for fish. It is even feared that communities living nearby the place of the accident might consume poisoned water. The whole area of rainforest will be affected by the presence of high concentrations of this heavy metal in water and soil.

Dome Resources has argued that this is the first time such an accident has happened in PNG. Nevertheless, a water analysis performed last year seven kilometres downstream Tolukuma mine revealed high levels of toxic metals such as copper, lead, zinc, mercury and silver. Such levels were significantly high even 20 kilometres away from the mine. Geoff Evans, Director of the Mineral Policy Institute, in Sidney, clearly stated that Dome's practices were unacceptable according to Australian standards. The precautionary principle seems to be something unheard of by the company.

This can be considered one more case of abuse resulting from the activities of a powerful foreign company in a Southern country which sees foreign investments with good eyes but at the same time finds difficulties in implementing effective control on the use and conservation of forests and waters. In the meantime, it is local communities who suffer the consequences of such kind of practices.

Article based on information from: Drillbits & Tailings, Tomo 5, Numero 5, 31/3/ 2000