
Papua New Guinea: the struggle of the Maisin indigenous people

Papua New Guinea still contains one of the major tropical rainforests in the world, hosting high levels of biodiversity. Together with the government's policy regarding forests -which considers them as a mere source of roundwood to be exported- and its collusion with powerful forestry companies (see WRM Bulletin 22), the activities of foreign logging companies constitute a threat to these rich ecosystems and to the people that inhabit them.

Since forests are home of millions of indigenous peoples, it is usually them who face the intruders which, in the name of "development" and generally with the explicit or implicit support of the authorities, try to take over their land and resources. After the clearcut of the forest, monoculture tree plantations are often established. This is also the case in Papua New Guinea.

The Maisin indigenous people are now fighting for a rainforest located inland from the coast of a Pacific Ocean island in the eastern region of the Papua New Guinean archipelago. The Maisin have traditionally cleared patches of forest for their crops and hunted wild animals to get their protein supply within the forest canopy. From the forests they also obtain building materials, medicines, and fresh water. "The forest is our livelihood. It's also our inheritance that our Maisin landowner forefathers have passed on to us," says John Wesley Vaso, a Maisin landowner. Their opponent is a big Malaysian company which claims having a valid lease and permits to clearcut the forest in the area, and immediately after establish an oil palm plantation. The company says that the new activity will mean the creation of many jobs for both logging activities and the planting and maintenance of the oil palm crop.

However, the forest dwellers do not believe in these false promises of economic development and welfare. They prefer to keep their forest standing and their small scale economy, based on traditional agriculture and hunting, and the selling of betel nuts, while at the same time not losing control over their land and livelihoods. Additionally, Malaysian logging companies are well known for their negative performance regarding forest resources and indigenous peoples that inhabit them, not only in their own country -which is the world's largest tropical timber producer- but also abroad. Their depredatory activities in the Brazilian Amazon is perhaps the clearest example of this.

Since under the country's constitution indigenous peoples are legal owners of their traditional lands, the Maisin have started a legal action against the company. They filed a lawsuit that has worked its way up to Papua New Guinea's highest court, and managed to stop until now the company's activities. Even if the final outcome of their lawsuit could be months away and new difficulties will appear since they have almost exhausted the financial resources they raised to pay for the legal process, their successful action has been considered an example that in the future can be followed by other indigenous peoples affected by this kind of abuses against their environmental and human rights.

Source: Glenn R. Barry, 26/11/99, e-mail: gbarry@students.wisc.students.edu World Rainforest Movement & Forest Monitor, High Stakes. The need to control transnational logging companies: a Malaysian case study, August 1998.

