
Papua New Guinea: mining expansion causes unrest

Papua New Guinea is located in the eastern part of the island of New Guinea and borders with Indonesia. The opening of the economy to foreign penetration has promoted the exploitation of natural resources at a level that has seriously damaged the environment.

One of the most conflictive activities is that of mining. The mines of Bougainville and Ok Tedi boast the largest copper deposits in the world. Last September the International Secretariat of the WRM -as well as the Oxford office- expressed their concern for the death of four indigenous Ekari men, that took place in August 20th, in the area of the Grasberg mine in Irian Jaya. Freeport-Rio Tinto appeared to be involved in these events, even if in a letter sent as a response to ours, the company not only denies any connection to these abuses, but also mentions its determination to cooperate with indigenous groups of the area.

The death of local peasants was followed by disturbances that the Papuan Armed Forces violently repressed. A few days later, the security forces ordered the community of Mimika district to hand over to them all sharp implements, which left people defenceless and deprived of their tools for agricultural, hunting and ceremonial uses.

To face increasing local and international criticism, Freeport-Rio Tinto decided to transfer 1% of profits of the mine to community development projects. This attempt to bribe indigenous people was rejected by LEMASA, the tribal council of the Amungme people. Puppet foundations were set up to ensure that funds were disbursed. But one year later a report by the Indonesian Human Rights Commission recommends that a more effective and clear way of transferring funds has to be found. Representatives of the three churches based in Mimika have categorically rejected any more funds, whose misuse has raised conflicts.

At the same time, the environmental impact of Freeport-Rio Tinto's mining activities have shown to be severe: flooding of forests and homes caused by the dumping of waste rocks on the Ajkwa River system downstream of the mine, and levels of mercury in the above mentioned river four-times higher than the maximum allowed of 0,001 mg/l.

In spite of these facts, the company continues to push ahead with its expansion project, while the government turns a blind eye on the impacts.

Source: The World Guide 1997/1998. Down to Earth nr. 35, November 1997.