
Papua New Guinea: Large-scale Logging and Human Rights Abuses

PNG's social, political and economic histories have been moulded by its tropical forests. Covering 60 per cent of the PNG land mass and largely impenetrable, the forests have limited trade, defined customary laws and delineated life and culture. When the world thinks of PNG, they see its forests.

Now, the logging of these incomparable life systems is corroding PNG's society and politics, with only trivial economic benefit, and with alarming flow-on effects in the region.

The PNG logging industry is dominated by a handful of Malaysian companies, the largest of which is Rimbanan Hijau. It is an industry that is synonymous with political corruption, police racketeering and the brutal repression of workers, women and those who question its ways. Its operations routinely destroy the food sources, water supplies and cultural property of those same communities. They provide a breeding ground for arms smuggling, corruption and violence across the country. In return, the industry generates no lasting economic benefit to forest communities, considerable long-term cost and a modest 5 per cent contribution to the national budget.

This record is a far cry from fulfilling PNG's Fourth National Goal – set upon its independence in 1975 – that its “natural resources and environment ... be conserved and used for the collective benefit of us all, and be replenished for the benefit of future generations”.

The logging industry wields influence in PNG through political donations, public sponsorship, lobbying and media ownership. Or, companies simply ‘buy’ the rights to logging areas outright. Government ministers interfere with logging projects on their behalf. The industry's leverage over the PNG government extends well beyond forestry. One company – Rimbanan Hijau, controlled by billionaire Malaysian Hiew King Tiong – has interests in the finance sector, the media, information technology, property, retailing, commercial printing, travel and shipping. These interests span beyond PNG. The Tiong family holds media assets in China, Malaysia, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Papua New Guinea, Canada and the US, as well as a radio station in New Zealand. In Australia, Tiong investments include the Harbourside shopping complex at Darling Harbour in Sydney, and companies that account for 10 per cent of Australia's mango crop.

The reform of the PNG logging industry is a distant prospect without concerted international action. Within PNG, corruption has stifled the will to uphold existing laws against the interests of logging companies. Where legal action has been taken, those involved have been attacked, physically and commercially.

In PNG, the capacity and political will to uphold legal and human rights is being undermined, not least by the logging industry itself. Disturbing instances of human rights abuse include:

- Denial of due process in appropriating property. The process by which the PNG Government buys timber rights from landowning communities and then issues ‘extraction’ licenses to logging companies is seriously flawed and amounts to the illegal appropriation of forest lands by loggers.

- Arbitrary detention and physical brutality by police against landowners. Attempts to restrain this appropriation are being dealt with brutally, sometimes by police 'moonlighting' for logging companies. The documented atrocities include the bashing of villagers taking legal action, incarceration without charge, the torching of homes and crops, the shooting of domestic animals with M16s, and men forced at gun point to commit homosexual acts with each other.

- Intimidation and abuse of women. Women suffer the next round of this violence. Community 'big men' handle dealings with logging companies, and some regard logging royalties as 'free money' to be spent on alcohol and weapons. Sexual abuse by logging employees is documented, as are marriages of convenience between expatriate employees and local women.

- Contamination of food and water sources. Far from the promised benefits, logging is denying people their right to an adequate standard of living. Sediment from cleared forest and roads is polluting rivers, as are chemicals used to kill timber pests and preserve felled logs. Fish, crayfish, wild pigs, cassowaries, tree kangaroos and birdlife – all food staples for local communities – have left logged areas.

- The destruction of cultural sites, artefacts and grave sites. Compensation for such acts of desecration is rarely forthcoming. These acts deny the rights of communities to use their own land for cultural and spiritual purposes.

- Unjust working conditions. The appalling labour conditions in many logging camps are again exposed. In Gulf Province, workers have died and been buried on the job rather than the company going to the expense of returning their bodies home. Timber industry workers have not been paid, have lived in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, worked 7am to 7pm and, with company transport the only option, have been held at their work area beyond their willingness to stay.

Human rights abuses have flourished thanks to the physical isolation of the logging communities, and the corruption and inadequate resources of PNG's government. These same conditions have allowed international trafficking in guns, timber, and people. Regional security, not just PNG governance, is being undermined.

In PNG, it is local people who are most skilled in sustainable forest management. Yet these skills are locked out of the forestry process, contrary to PNG's National Goals and Directive Principles.

An immediate moratorium must be placed on the granting and renewal of all logging permits. The current model is not working.

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