
Papua New Guinea: God help its forests against these "custodians"!

The Australian SBS Television Dateline programme has produced a documentary concerning fraud, incompetence, corruption and human rights violations by transnational logging companies operating in Papua New Guinea. The documentary exposes widespread cases of loggers raping local women at the barrel of a gun and landowners being forced to sign legal documents, also at gunpoint. The programme states that police are on logging companies' payrolls and that foreign loggers "are a law unto themselves" in their logging concession areas.

Instead of immediately asking for an enquiry into those extremely serious allegations, the PNG Forest Industries Association and the National Forests Board responded by accusing the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the Eco-Forestry Forum and other NGOs of being 'puppets' of foreign countries and of the World Bank!

However, criticisms to logging companies come from all quarters. Trade union officials "have taken dozens of statements from women and girls who say they're routinely threatened with guns and that shots are fired to scare them into having sex". The World Bank's independent review team reports that the PNG Forest Authority is "incompetent at almost every level of the forest management process". Lawyer Annie Kajir tells of allegations that in the Bamu River area of Western province "landowners are forced to sign papers with a barrel of a gun at their back." A police officer says that "police are recruited by logging companies to act only in the loggers' interests and that one man was locked in a shipping container for three days."

Confronted with all those documented allegations, the PNG Forest Industries Association simply denies everything and puts the blame for forest destruction on others by saying: "The major cause of deforestation in PNG, as elsewhere in the tropics, is due to forest conversion for agricultural pursuits or due to fire." In its four-page reply to "Dateline", the Association asks: "Is the real problem ... that the World Bank and its NGO partners cannot accept that they are not the real custodians of PNG's forests in PNG eyes?"

May we ask: are transnational logging companies operating in PNG those "real custodians"? If that's the case, then God help PNG's forests and people!

Article based on information from: Forest Conservation News Today. "Papua New Guinea: Loggers Accused of Corruption and Rape" (<http://forests.org/emailaction/png.htm>); "SBS accuses loggers of corruption", AAP, in the National (PNG), May 2, 2001, by: Kevin Ricketts