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PNG government must act on international criticism over human rights abuses against its indigenous peoples

Civil society organisations are urging the Papua New Guinea government to take immediate action to end pervasive land grabbing and illegal logging after these issues were highlighted by governments around the world in formal recommendations put before the United Nations yesterday (1).

“A number of countries have raised serious concerns about the human rights situation for indigenous communities in PNG who are suffering the impacts of the land grabbing and environmental destruction related to logging and other extractive industries” says Eddie Tanago, Campaign Coordinator for ACT NOW!. “The PNG government must take seriously the calls from its peers and act decisively to protect indigenous land rights and the environment.”

The human rights situation in PNG is being scrutinised by the United Nations Human Rights Council in a process known as the Universal Periodic Review carried out every five years for each member country. Global Witness, Rainforest Foundation Norway and ACT NOW! made submissions to the Council as part of the process (2).

A total of fifty-three countries have made recommendations as part of the review for how the PNG government should tackle human rights abuses. Echoing issues raised by civil society, a number of countries have voiced alarm over the violation of constitutionally guaranteed land rights of indigenous communities. These rights have been trampled on in recent years as a result of large extractive projects, in particular through the widespread abuse of agriculture permits known as Special Agriculture and Business Leases, or SABLs, by foreign-backed logging companies. Under the permits, PNG’s unique rainforests are being razed while PNG police are used by logging companies to suppress, sometimes violently, opposition by landowners.

“The issues of illegal logging and land grabbing in PNG are being highlighted by the the Human Rights Council working group. Norway, Chile and Thailand raised specific concerns about the human rights impacts of the SABL land grab, in which more than 5 million hectares of land was unlawfully taken from customary landowners” says Ronny Hansen from Rainforest Foundation Norway. “Mexico has recommended PNG to ensure prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples and Switzerland has called for the prosecution of security forces guilty of abuses against indigenous landowners – to name just a few examples. The PNG government’s response to this sharp criticism of its human rights record must not be more empty denials; instead it should waste no time in implementing the important recommendations provided by the international community.”

The PNG government has already recognized the serious legal and human rights issues associated with the SABL scheme. In 2011, it set up an independent investigation to review the leases. The investigation found evidence of widespread violations of the land rights of indigenous landowners and other illegalities, but three years after the findings were published, the government has failed to take any meaningful action to follow up and cancel illegal leases.

In response to the criticisms at the UN, Fred Sarufa, PNG's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, claimed last Friday PNG has laws and a strong system in place to control illegal logging and violations of land rights, and that issues "are dealt with within the legal provisions that we have".

"The government's initial response is wholly inadequate and speaks to an alarming pattern of ignoring the human rights of its citizens and turning a blind eye when its laws are flouted", states Reiner Tegtmeier of Global Witness.

"Nearly three years after an official investigation recommended that 90% of the SABL's examined were invalid, logging operations continue at an unprecedented rate, permanently stripping indigenous communities of their rights and livelihoods. The UN review is yet another wake up call that what is happening in PNG is a human rights catastrophe. The government must cancel illegal agriculture leases and return the land to its rightful owners without further delay."

Notes to Editor:

(1) The recommendations of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, under the UN Human Rights Council, were first presented during its 6 May 2016 review of PNG. A video recording of the meeting can be viewed at: <http://webtv.un.org/search/papua-new-guinea-review-25th-session-of-universal-periodic-review/4880644467001?term=papua%20new%20guinea>

The draft report containing the recommendations was adopted on 11 May 2016 and will be considered by the Human Rights Council in September 2016 following the addition of formal responses from the PNG government. The draft report can be accessed at:

[http://actnowpng.org/sites/default/files/Draft%20Report-A_HRC_WG.6_25_L.7_PNG%20\(1\).pdf](http://actnowpng.org/sites/default/files/Draft%20Report-A_HRC_WG.6_25_L.7_PNG%20(1).pdf)

(2) A summary of stakeholder submissions compiled by the UN can be accessed at:

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/PGSession25.aspx>

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