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Police hired by loggers in Papua New Guinea lock locals in shipping containers

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mongabay.com
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A bulldozer rumbles over a recently deforested area in Pomio District, East New Britain, Papua New Guinea. Photo by: Paul Hilton/Greenpeace.

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protesting the destruction of their forest in Papua New Guinea for two palm oil plantations say police have been sent in for a second time to crack-down on their activities, even as a Commission of Inquiry (COI) investigates the legality of the concession. Traditional landowners in Pomio District on the island East New Britain say police bankrolled by Malaysian logging giant Rimbunan Hijau (RH) have terrorized the population, including locking people in shipping containers for three consecutive nights. The palm oil concessions belongs to a company known as Gilford Limited, which locals say is a front group for RH.

"The current situation is very bad. The [villagers] are trying their best to do (a) blockade, but because of the police involvement the people are very scared to stand up and defend their land and speak their rights. The logging operation is still going on and is destroying the big forest, the rivers, and sea more every day," a local landowner told mongabay. The landowner spoke on anonymity for fear of reprisal.

Last year, complaints over mistreatment by police in logging areas rose to such a feverish pitch across Papua New Guinea that police commissioner, Tom Kulunga, withdrew all police forces from logging areas in the country. But now locals in Pomio, at least, say the police have returned and abusive practices continue.

"The police have mistreated the locals by abusing them with sticks, fan belts, telling them to sit in the sun for five hours, swearing at them, arriving in the villages at night forcing them to sign papers with the people understanding the content, tying their hands to their back, and commanding them to run in the hot sun," the landowner said, noting that the alleged abuse began on March 5th.

The landowner also said that the police locked up six people in shipping containers for three nights.

Last year, locals said the police were paid and flown in by Rimbunan Hijau (RH), which was confirmed by Assistant Police Commissioner Anton Billy to the Australian Broadcast Corporation (ABC) in an [interview](#). He told the ABC that this was "normal."

"We don't have any funds to get these people there and pay them allowance and all this stuff," Billy said.



People from Pomio protest the destruction of their traditional forests under Special Agricultural and Business Leases (SABLS). Photo by: Paul Hilton/Greenpeace.

The two palm oil concessions in question, covering some 26,000 hectares for a 99-year lease, are a part of a hugely controversial land program by the Papua New Guinea government known as Special Agricultural and Business Leases (SABLS). Critics contend SABLS are being used en masse to circumvent Papua New Guinea's strong community land laws—where 97 percent of the land is ostensibly owned by local communities—granting massive areas of land to foreign corporations for extractive activities such as logging. SABLS have led to conflict and deforestation across Papua New Guinea. Last year the government suspended any new SABLS and launched an independent investigation into the

practice, which up to then had handed over 5.2 million hectares to foreign corporations, an area larger than Costa Rica.

A Commission of Inquiry (COI) has been set up to investigate particular problems with the two palm oil concessions in Pomio, including allegations of fake signatures—such as signing children's names to official documents—and other irregularities.

"The people facilitating the paperwork falsely wrote other peoples names and used false signatures. Some of these have already been proved false by the Commission of Inquiry (COI) in Kokopo," the source says.

According to locals the palm oil plantation has also upended four community eco-forestry projects run by local NGO, Forcert.

"The forest set-ups are now all destroyed and it has affected the villages very badly," the source says, noting that projects in Mauna, Lau, Bairaman, and Mu have been decimated.

Given the tension and reports of on-going abuse, the anonymous source says its time for the independent investigation to step in.

"My people and I want the Commission of Inquiry to fast track its report and present it to the cabinet. The report must include recommendations, and one recommendation must state that all SABLs be terminated and the land returned to the real landowners."

A 2009 study found that nearly a quarter of the Papua New Guinea's forests were already lost or degraded by logging between 1972-2002. Still, the nation retains one of the world's largest intact rainforests aside from the Amazon and the Congo, and most of its populace are directly dependent on the forest for their livelihood. Given that almost all the land is community owned, there are very few protected areas in Papua New Guinea. The first national conservation park, YUS Conservation Area, was established in 2009.



The beginnings of a palm oil plantation on newly deforested area in Pomio District. Photo by: Paul Hilton/Greenpeace.

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(10/27/2011) In 1968, distinguished anthropologist Roy Rappaport wrote a seminal publication of human ecology: 'Pigs for the Ancestors: Rituals in the Ecology of a New Guinea People' which integrated cultural ritual with the necessity of

maintaining pre-existing relationships with the environment. Documenting the behavior activities of the Tsembaga Maring tribe in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, Rappaport recognized how various activities of the tribe's intrinsic culture was a direct product of that peoples' relation with their natural environment.

[Big damage in Papua New Guinea: new film documents how industrial logging destroys lives](#)



(08/29/2011) In one scene a young man, perhaps not long ago a boy, named Douglas stands shirtless and in shorts as he runs a chainsaw into a massive tropical tree. Prior to this we have already heard from an official how employees operating

chainsaws must have a bevy of protective equipment as well as training, but in Papua New Guinea these are just words. The reality is this: Douglas straining to pull the chainsaw out of the tree as it begins to fall while his fellow employees flee the tumbling giant. The new film Bikpela Bagarap('Big Damage') documents the impact of industrial logging on the lives of local people in Papua New Guinea.

[Logging company fined \\$100 million for illegal logging in Papua New Guinea](#)

(06/28/2011) In a landmark court decision a judge has slapped a logging company with a nearly \$100 million (K225.5 million) fine for large-scale illegal logging. Last week, Malaysian timber company, Concord Pacific, was sentenced to pay four forest tribes for environmental destruction in the first ruling of its kind for Papua New Guinea.

Papua New Guinea suspends controversial grants of community forest lands to foreign corps



(05/06/2011) The government of Papua New Guinea yesterday suspended its controversial Special Agricultural and Business Leases program which has granted logging and plantation development concessions to mostly foreign

corporations across 5.2 million hectares of community forest land, reports the *Courier-Post*

Scientists urge Papua New Guinea to declare moratorium on massive forest clearing

(04/19/2011) Forests spanning an area larger than Costa Rica—5.6 million hectares (13.8 million acres)—have been handed out by the Papua New Guinea government to foreign corporations, largely for logging. Granted under government agreements known as Special Agricultural and Business Leases (SABLS), the land leases circumvent the nation's strong laws pertaining to communal land ownership. Now, the Association for Tropical Biology and Conservation (ATBC), the world's largest professional society devoted to studying and conserving tropical forests, is urging the Papua New Guinea government to declare a moratorium on SABLS.

5 million hectares of Papua New Guinea forests handed to foreign corporations



(03/23/2011) During a meeting in March 2011 twenty-six experts—from biologists to social scientists to NGO staff—crafted a statement calling on the Papua New Guinea government to stop granting Special Agricultural and Business

Leases. According to the group, these leases, or SABLS as they are known, circumvent Papua New Guinea's strong community land rights laws and imperil some of the world's most intact rainforests. To date 5.6 million hectares (13.8 million acres) of forest have been leased under SABLS, an area larger than all of Costa Rica. "Papua New Guinea is among the most biologically and culturally diverse nations on Earth. [The country's] remarkable diversity of cultural groups rely intimately on their traditional lands and forests in order to meet their needs for farming plots, forest goods, wild game, traditional and religious sites, and many other goods and services," reads the statement, dubbed the Cairns Declaration. However, according to the declaration all of this is threatened by the Papua New Guinea government using SABLS to grant large sections of land without going through the proper channels.

Stopping export logging, oil palm expansion in PNG in 2012 would cost \$1.8b, says economist

(03/07/2011) Stopping logging for timber export and conversion of forest for oil palm plantations would cost Papua New Guinea roughly \$2.8 billion dollars from 2012 to 2025, but would significantly reduce the country's greenhouse gas emissions, according to a new analysis published by an economist from the University of Queensland.

Foreign corporations devastating Papua New Guinea rainforests



(10/21/2010) A letter in *Nature* from seven top scientists warns that Papua New Guinea's accessible forest will be lost or heavily logged in just ten to twenty years if swift action isn't taken. A potent mix of poor governance, corruption, and

corporate disregard is leading to the rapid loss of Papua New Guinea's much-heralded rainforests, home to a vast array of species found no-where else in the world. "Papua New Guinea has some of the world's most biologically and culturally rich forests, and they're vanishing before our eyes," author William Laurance of James Cook University in Cairns, Australia, said in a statement.

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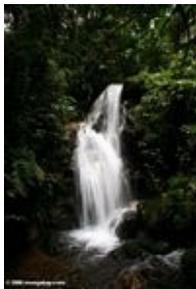
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