

K10b regret!

Pomio landowners: We want our land back

By GRACE TIDEN

◆We want our land back◆ was the response of two female landowner representatives when asked to comment during the extended Commission of Inquiry into the acquisition of Special Agriculture Business Leases (SABL) in Kokopo yesterday.

Solar Konpunrea and Sekunda Gwemor from Portion 196c (Pomata Investments Limited) in the Memalo Integrated Project area in West Pomio represented other women landowners and more are expected to give evidence today.

Inquiry head, Commissioner Alois Jerewai, in trying to explain the sub-lease agreement to the two women and all other female and male landowners who came in from Pomio two days ago, asked if they were aware of the whole arrangement and especially the agreement.

He said it would cost roughly K10 billion if the West Pomio landowners were to break up the sub-lease contract with developer Gilford Limited, a subsidiary of Malaysian logging giant Rimbunan Hijau, owners of The National newspaper.

The witnesses, mostly women represented the four SABL areas in West Pomio which included Portion 196c, Portion 197c, Portion 198c and Portion 27c which were all under the landowner company, Memalo Holdings Limited.

Commissioner Jerewai explained the agreement to the landowners and told them that their land was sub-leased for 60 years and cash crops that would be grown on their land, including facilities built on their land would belong to the company.

He said after 60 years, Gilford had the option to extend the agreement for another 30 years.

However, he told the two women that if they decided to get back their land and break the agreement, they would have to compensate the developer.

They would have to pay the cost of the township that was built by the developer, the cost of every oil palm plant on their land, the water supply, electricity, roads and any other developments brought about by Gilford.

Commissioner Jerewai further said they (landowners) would also pay Gilford all the profits the company expected to earn in the remaining years.

◆By rough estimates, this would cost K10 billion,◆ he said.

He asked the witnesses whether they knew what their landowner companies had signed with Gilford. He told the two women to speak their mind as this was their only opportunity to do so.

The two women said all they wanted was to get their land back, adding that they had a matrilineal society where the land belonged to the women.

They also said there was lack of consent as highlighted by other women witnesses last week.

Commissioner Jerewai said he was told by a Gilford employee that similar arrangements were done in Malaysia where natives gave up their land for only 11 years.

After 11 years, the landowners get back their land including the cash crops and facilities that were built on their land.

In PNG, it◆s different. Landowners can have jobs with the company but will not own anything.

He also said all male landowners who gave evidence last week admitted that they did not fully understand the agreement before signing it and most regretted their decision. The inquiry will continue until this Friday and Gilford Limited representatives who were also present yesterday will be called to give evidence.