

SABL leases flawed

Women shocked, all agreements defective

By GRACE TIDEN

POMIO women expressed shock before the SABL inquiry in Kokopo yesterday when told they were signatories to the lease-lease back agreement.

They were in even more shock to learn that some of the signatories were their own children who were so young they would not even hold up an ink pen.

SABL Commission of Inquiry commissioner Alois Jerewai expressed concern at the findings which is hearing into four SABL leases in Pomio which involve Gilford Limited, a subsidiary of Rimbunan Hijau, the owners of The National newspaper.

Mr Jerewai said it appeared the documents involved in securing the SABLs were flawed.

He questioned the Land Investigation Report used to supplement the SABL leases.

Mr Jerewai heard from Pomio women leaders Claudia Koisilele and Ludwina Kora that they had never signed any agreement giving their land away.

Ms Koisilele, representing Portion 197C (Ralopal Investments Limited) and Ms Kora, from Portion 196C (Pomata Investments Limited) gave evidence during the second day of the inquiry in Kokopo, now into its third week.

Both women, who have their names and signatures in the report including their very young children, denied signing the document and on behalf of their children.

If this is the case then it would mean that all other subsequent documents and agreements in relation to the logging project in the West Pomio area of East New Britain Province would also be defective.

Mr Jerewai, who had another long day yesterday with landowners' representatives from all four SABL areas in Pomio, called mostly women landowners to give evidence especially in regards to the Lands Investigation Report.

Puipui Tuna, from the ENB lands division, was also called to verify if they had identified the customs of the landowners when carrying out the investigation.

Commissioner Jerewai also asked if they had based their investigation report on what was provided by executives of ILGs and landowner companies.

Mr Tuna said that was so and that they had given documents to executives to take up with the landowners.

Commissioner Jerewai went on to tell him that ILGs did not own customary land and it was only a body formed by different clan members and so the landowners themselves did not have the opportunity to express themselves.

Names and signatures of children under five years old were also found in the Land Investigation Report ownership schedules, including names of people appearing more than once with different signatures.

In both the lease-lease back instrument as well as the sublease between landowner companies and the developer, Gilford Limited, a subsidiary of logging giant Rimbunan Hijau, names of signatories were all men and in their matrilineal custom, women were the ones to make any decision regarding their land.

ALSO of significance were the inconsistent signatures of some of these male signatories of these documents, suggesting possible forgery.

Mr Jerewai told the women that in the Lands Investigation Report they all agreed to surrender their land to the State.

The State then sub-leases the land back to the landowners companies who then holds a leaseback title. However he raised serious doubt over the correctness of the Lands Investigation Report.

Gilford representatives will be called to give evidence today.