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## Four years on, PNG govt still dragging chain on SABL

2:55 pm today



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The Commission of Inquiry's findings were clear enough: Most of the deals under which Papua New Guinea's government leased about 12 percent of the country's land was illegal.

The agreements, known as Special Agricultural Business Leases, amounted to a massive land grab, the 2013 inquiry said, and were often granted through questionable deals brokered by questionable politicians.



Bewani landowners walk across pile of felled logs, West Sepik Province Photo: Global Witness Media

Loggers, often foreign-owned, were granted 99-year leases to convert forest into agricultural or plantation projects, with little regard for the environment or indigenous communities, who own most of the country's land. In fact, a high proportion of these landowners were either misled or had no say at all, the inquiry found.

After the inquiry's report was tabled in parliament, the government of Prime Minister Peter O'Neill promised to cancel the leases and stop the logging of pristine jungle. But four years later, NGOs and activists say the trees continue to tumble, and a proposed replacement for the SABLs is just as worrying.

As recently as March, Mr O'Neill denounced the SABLs, and said they were cancelled. But Eddie Tanago, from the NGO Act Now, begged to differ.

"The illegal logging has actually continued and is continuing as we speak and the leaseholders are currently on the land itself," said Mr Tanago. "We are calling on the Minister to confirm that all the SABLs have been cancelled [and] logging in the SABL areas have been stopped."

Now the country's long and shambolic election process is winding down, with Mr O'Neill's government returned for a second term, Mr Tanago has renewed his calls for something to, finally, be done to stop the logging.



Export of round logs is the main economic activity in West Sepik, but the profits largely go abroad. Photo: RNZI / Johnny Blades

The reinstated forests minister, Douglas Tomuriesa, insists the government is acting.

"All SABLs are cancelled in the country," said Mr Tomuriesa. "So whoever is operating a SABL project in the country is operating illegally."

That comes as little relief in districts where loggers continue to fell native timbers, said Mr Tanago, who said companies were ploughing through forests with little heed for the words of Waigani.

However, Mr Tomuriesa, while condemning loggers, said the issue was more complex than simply kicking everybody out of the country.

He said some of the deforested areas were now productive agriculture, cocoa or oil palm operations, and their benefits needed to be considered. "We have to support those and make certain that they do the right thing and that proper things are done, landowner identities and whatsoever," he said.

Mr Tomuriesa denied that meant companies had gotten away with illegal logging, rather, that the best would have to be made of a bad situation for landowners to at least gain something from their losses.

But so far, very little of the money generated has gone to local communities, who have also been deprived of access to their forests and land.

The government's latest plan is to convert the SABLs into so-called "customary leases," which Mr Tomuriesa said would give landowners more power and benefits, with the onus shifted to giving customary landowners control of lease arrangements.

But Rick Jacobsen, from the NGO Global Witness, who recently tracked the supply chain of PNG timber through Chinese factories to retailers in the United States, including major chain stores like Home Depot, said he was worried the customary leases would just be SABLs by another name.



A road created by a SABL operation in Pomio, East New Britain. Photo: Global Witness

"Whatever name they give it, the fundamental issue is; were the landowners properly informed and given a chance to go through the processes for making a decision about what's best for their future?," he asked.

Mr Jacobsen said it was unclear which legal mechanisms had been used to issue a slew of new forestry permits in the past year, which he said was worrying.

In PNG, Act Now also had its concerns about the new style of leases. Mr Tanago said the conversion was as much about appeasing foreign-owned - and wealthy - logging companies as much as it was about satisfying landowners, as their land would still be alienated and under foreign control in a country where land is everything.

On top of that, Mr Tanago said many of the problems highlighted by the Commission of Inquiry four years ago, such as the involvement of corrupt politicians, had not been resolved - and would not be resolved by the transfer of leases.

However, Mr Tomuriesa insisted he was working with landowners, promising a series of significant forestry-related announcements in the next few weeks.