Concord Pacific and Rimbunan Hijau are fighting for control of Western Province

The two largest logging companies in Papua New Guinea are fighting for control of the unallocated forests of Western Province. These forests are the largest remaining tracts of untouched forest in PNG and are the subject of a bitter battle between two Malaysian owned companies, Rimbunan Hijau and Concord Pacific.

The remote Western Province contains most of PNGs last remaining large contiguous tracts of untouched forests. Although this forest is wet, swampy and inaccessible, with the better stocked and more easily accessible forests of the Islands Region already exhausted and the forests of Gulf Province already allocated, Western Province, and to a lesser extent, West Sepik, are the only areas available to fuel the future of the log export industry.

Malaysian owned Rimbunan Hijau and Concord Pacific already control around 75% of PNGs log exports and both already have a toehold in Western Province. Rimbunan Hijau has been operating the Wawoi Guavi concession since 1992 and Concord Pacific has been logging between Aiambak and Kiunga since 1995. Both operations are widely regarded as being illegal.

The Wawoi Guavi concession is illegal because it is operating without the informed consent of local resource owners and in February 2002, a 10-year extension was granted to the logging permit without the necessary approval of either the Provincial Forest Management Committee or the National Forest Board.

The Kiunga Aiambak project is also illegal. The Timber Authority was granted by a Minister acting outside his powers and with no proper procedures having being followed. Two subsequent extensions to the project have been similarly deficient.

Both companies have been trying desperately to extend their logging operations in Western Province. In 1999 the National Forest Board voted to give the huge Kamula Dosa logging concession to Rimbunan Hijau. Kamula Dosa covers some 790,000 hectares (one fifth of the land area of Western Province).

In granting Kamula Doso to Rimbunan Hijau as an extension to the Wawoi Guavi project, the Board ignored all the normal allocation procedures and the normal tendering
processes. The Board also ignored the wishes of local resource owners, the advice of the Forest Authority and the Provincial Forest Management Committee.

The decision of the Board is now the subject of an Ombudsman investigation and the extension has been put on hold.

In 2000 the National Executive Council received a submission that Concord Pacific should be granted rights to construct 875 kilometres of road in Western Province. This was to be funded through log exports from a 6 kilometre wide corridor or ‘buffer zone’.

The proposed road alignment goes through the heart of seven proposed logging concessions, including Kamula Dosa, but carefully weaves around the two existing logging concessions at Wawoi Guavi and Makapa (see map below).

The NEC submission was rejected on the advice of a number of government Departments who described the project as ‘clearly bogus’ and ‘blatantly in breach’ of the law.

This did not deter the Minister for Forests and Deputy Prime Minister, Michael Ogio, who in December 2000, granted an illegal Timber Authority to allow the logging to go ahead. After public exposure the Minister was forced to rescind the permit.

But in December 2001, Concord Pacific succeeded again. In December 2001 a new Timber Authority was granted by the Forest Authority for logging along an 830 kilometre corridor. This permit was granted with none of the proper procedures being followed and no authorisation from either the Provincial Forest Management Committee or the National Forest Board.

Rimbunan Hijau are furious that Concord Pacific appears to have beaten them to access into the unallocated forest areas of Western Province. RH has therefore unleashed the wrath of their support network on both Concord Pacific and its controversial general manager, Philip Lee. This network includes the RH financed, Forest Industries Association, RH’s own newspaper, The National, and the Chair of the National Forest Board, Dr Wari Iamo.
Lee won't be allowed back

Kiunga-Aiambak TA illegal: Iamo

Kiunga-Aiambak timber concession has been logged, claims Iamo

The Kiunga-Aiambak timber concession has been logged, claims Iamo. The National Forestry Authority (NFA) and Thomas Lee, its executive director, has been investigated for alleged violations of forestry laws.

The concession was granted to the Kiunga-Aiambak Forest Association (KAF) in March 2002. However, in May 2002, the NFA filed a police report against Lee for alleged breaches of forestry laws.

Lee, who is the executive director of the NFA, has denied the allegations. He said that the NFA had not given permission for the logging to take place. Lee also alleged that the Kiunga-Aiambak Forest Association had not paid the required fees for the concession.

The Kiunga-Aiambak Forest Association had been logging in the area since 2002. However, the NFA has not given permission for the logging to continue. Lee said that the NFA had been investigating the case since 2002.

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CONTROVERSIAL logging company Concord Pacific could not become a member of the Forest Industries Association because it did not meet the group’s membership criteria.

And the association had been against and even tried to shut down the operations of the company’s much publicised Kiunga-Aiambak project in the Western Province since 1996.

Association executive officer Bob Tate, accompanied by PNG Association of Foresters president Andrew Tagamasu, revealed this to the Post-Courier on Friday.

Mr Tate said the FIA was opposed to Concord Pacific’s Kiunga-Aiambak logging operation long before the project became a controversy. He said the association was critical of the company’s operations between 1996 and 1999 when they joined the National Forest Board to try to shut the Malaysian firm’s operations.

“For many years we were the only organisation which was publicly speaking out against it. Now it has become a political football exploited for public relations purposes and it is a pity that some of the most vocal people now about the project were not here in 1996, 97, 98 and 99,” Mr Tate said.

“They (Concord Pacific) are not members of the FIA, nor would we have them as members — they do not meet the criteria. We, like other organisations, have a code of conduct and a set of standards.”

He said the company’s Kiunga-Aiambak operation had created a negative image of the timber industry. The project’s controversy distorted rational debate on forest issues regarding forest management, its sustainability and economic returns.

Mr Tagamasu said “a lot of work was done in the last 50 years to set up a responsible forest industry.”
Concord's new illegal logging permit gives access to 2.7 million hectares of forest

Concord Pacific, the logging company under fire for its unlawful Kiunga Aiambak logging operation, has recently been given another illegal logging permit that gives it access through eight unallocated logging concessions with a total area of over 2.7 million hectares.

The Timber Authority, signed in December 2001, allows Concord Pacific to log a 6 kilometre wide and 831-kilometre long corridor through the heart of the last remaining forests of Western Province. The proposed route of the corridor weaves through eight unallocated logging concessions including the Kamula Doea and East Awin forest management areas.

This new Timber Authority is totally illegal as it was granted without the approval of the Provincial Forest Management Committee and without any of the detailed procedures of either the 1993 Forestry Act or the 2000 Amendment Act having being followed.

2nd June 2002

Documents available on request (as gif/word files)

- Media Release on grant of the illegal Timber Authority dated 29th May 2002
- Copy of the illegal Timber Permit and letter of approval from the PNG Forest Authority