

Skewed vision from team green

Alan Oxley says Greenpeace is using misleading claims to cut down logging

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GREENPEACE is running a campaign that is raising eyebrows. It is accusing one large company of rape, enslaving its workers, abusing human rights, employing police brutality and corruption. In the worst criticism Greenpeace heaped on Shell over oil drilling in the North Sea and on Monsanto for developing and selling genetically modified oilseeds, it never resorted to such abuse. So who is the target now?

It is a company called Rimbunan Hijau, one of the largest foreign investors in Papua New Guinea and its largest forestry business. Greenpeace's attack on the company is a proxy attack on commercial forestry in PNG, which it wants to stop. Greenpeace has been joined by the Centre for Environmental Law and Conservation in PNG and the Australian Conservation Foundation. A recently released CELCOR-ACF report claims to present new evidence of the human rights abuses of the forestry industry. But all that is new are claims of five instances of abuse in nine years, all of which are unsubstantiated.

Conveniently, CELCOR and ACF report the complainants need to remain anonymous for their own safety. This means that none of the claims can be tested for truthfulness. Otherwise, the report repeats old claims, some of which have been made for a decade, about corruption, sexual abuse and enslavement in forestry in PNG. It repeats unsubstantiated reports published by Greenpeace in the past four years and unsubstantiated claims of human rights abuse in PNG aired by SBS, which has since removed the transcript of the program from its website.

To freshen the green campaign, the CELCOR-ACF report carries insinuations that Australian military forces and forestry companies are responsible for distribution of arms throughout PNG. This is a calculated distortion of an ugly reality in PNG. Personal safety in the country has never been poorer. Businesses across the country are calling in help from police forces to keep order. For forestry (and other) companies operating in remote environments, this is crucial. These businesses frequently transport citizens, officials and firefighters.

If Greenpeace succeeds in this campaign, it will be bad luck for the poor. Commercial forestry is an important contributor to PNG's economy. Evidently Greenpeace considers it is better to be poor and green than to reduce poverty and educate children.

Rimbunan Hijau is a Malaysia-based group whose activities include the biggest forestry business in PNG. Greenpeace says the company is "acting as ruthless robber barons, plundering the rainforest with impunity" and that most of the company's logging (and therefore most logging in PNG) is illegal.

Greenpeace is also trying to orchestrate global pressure against the company. Recently, activists climbed on top of the Cabinet Office in London and called on British Prime Minister Tony Blair to stop imports of timber from PNG because Greenpeace has labelled them illegal. In Australia it is lobbying the Government to do the same thing.

The organisation also wants a global consumer boycott. It has accused the chief executive of one of the largest timber importers in Britain of complicity in the destruction of PNG's forests by importing PNG timber. The company has buckled and agreed not to buy any more.

The PNG Government vehemently denies that most forestry activity in its country is illegal. Our consultancy has completed an exhaustive analysis of these claims and concluded the PNG Government is right. There have been irregularities in forestry administration, as expected in a low-income developing country, and they have been corrected.

The way Greenpeace decides what is illegal is a set-up. It contends logging is illegal if, at the time it occurs, not all relevant government laws and regulations have been fully applied, not all provisions of all relevant international treaties have been implemented and not all relevant (presumably according to Greenpeace) human rights and labour rights have been provided.

Consider what this means. If a government agency doesn't do its job properly, any transaction made by a business operating under regulations administered by that agency is illegal. In our system of law, everybody enjoys the presumption of innocence. The way Greenpeace seems to want it, someone is automatically guilty if a government official is incompetent. This is a ruse. When applied in a poor, developing country where all government administration is rickety, it reflects a callous calculation.

Greenpeace's rhetoric stands in stark contrast to the hollowness of its claims. PNG is lush with forests; they cover 65 per cent of the country. Greenpeace claims these forests could be cleared within a decade. That is impossible. Only 31 per cent of PNG forests have been marked for commercial use; that is, forestry and clearance for agriculture. Among the remaining forest, 5 per cent has been reserved to protect biodiversity and 37 per cent remains unallocated. PNG's forests are not endangered, nor is its natural biodiversity.

We also examined every one of Greenpeace's allegations of rape, police brutality and abuse of labour rights and corruption made against the company. We concluded they are baseless or cannot be properly substantiated. Greenpeace says the company practises slavery. The PNG labour department reported that the targeted company pays its work force 2.7 times the PNG minimum wage. Slavers don't do that.

The allegation of police brutality is based on claims by one former police officer who has left the country. Forestry companies in PNG work closely with the police. Greenpeace well knows that law enforcement breaks down regularly in parts of PNG. Forestry

businesses regularly transport police to remote areas because they have aircraft, while the police don't. They are performing a public service.

Greenpeace wants commercial logging in PNG's native forests replaced with eco-forestry or subsistence forestry. Yet the consequences would be immense. The commercial forestry industry in PNG employs about 10,000 people, generates about 5 per cent of the economy, earns about \$250 million year in exports and adds \$100 million to tax revenues. In addition, companies such as Rimbunan Hijau provide roads, airfields, air services, wharves and schools and medical clinics in remote areas.

Not only would this all be lost if the industry were closed down, but the PNG Government would have to subsidise the replacement eco-forestry. For 10 years there have been efforts to demonstrate the commercial viability of eco-forestry in PNG and all have failed. Even WWF (formerly the World Wide Fund for Nature), Greenpeace's partner in its forestry campaigns, says eco-forestry can succeed only if government pays for it.

PNG needs more growth and revenue, not less. Seventy per cent of people in PNG live on less than \$US2 (\$2.66) a day. Three out of four children in rural areas do not go to school. The Asian Development Bank reported in 2004 that, per capita, gross domestic product in PNG was 10 per cent lower than in 1975.

Recently, Patrick Pruaitch, PNG's Minister for Forests, said that if Greenpeace had its way, "the people of PNG would pay the price". He said the Government would resist efforts by international green non-government organisations to weaken PNG's economy.

What is driving Greenpeace to propose such a strategy? It opposes commercial forestry in natural bush, yet there is no environmental science that tells us this is necessary. Native forests can be sustainably logged, as they are in Australia. PNG has plenty of forest to get the environmental balance right.

To Greenpeace, PNG is just a pawn in a bigger campaign. For more than 15 years, Greenpeace and WWF have hankered for a global forest convention to implement their goal of replacing commercial forestry with eco-forestry worldwide. Only some European countries support this. Developing countries mistrust their motives and the US does not support it. So the strategy is to whip up concern about illegal logging and goad governments into using trade sanctions to bring developing countries to heel.

Alan Oxley is principal of ITS Global, consultants on global issues, who recently analysed the forestry situation in PNG for Rimbunan Hijau and produced a report on the industry's economic importance.

*Two ITS reports, *The Economic Importance of the Forestry Industry to PNG and Whatever It Takes: Greenpeace's Anti-Forestry Campaign in PNG:**

<http://www.forestryanddevelopment.com>