

# ECHOES FROM THE PAPUA NEW GUINEAN FOREST

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Political, social, and economic changes have shaken the foundation of what was previously a fairly stable way of life in Papua New Guinea. Some of these changes are associated with the cutting of our forests by multinational logging companies. Our beautiful “land of the unexpected”, or “land of paradise”, is slowly losing its identity and value through the dishonest manipulation of the loggers, assisted by the regime of an elite within the nation itself.

In this article, I want to address the issue of logging, from the perspective of moral and pastoral theology. It is vital to have a true picture of how much forest we have, and what impact logging has already had on our social and physical environment. I will analyse some statistics, and look at issues relevant to theological and moral questions.

## **THE FOREST RESOURCES**

On a global scale, PNG is thought to have the world’s third largest rainforest, after the Amazon (South America), and the Congo basin (Africa). There is great diversity of life. The forests support about 200 species of mammals, more than 15,000 plant species, 1,500 tree species, and 750 different species of birds.<sup>1</sup> Despite the diversity of animal and plant species, our forests are not unlimited. Most of them are found along the coastal areas, rather than the Highlands. A comprehensive analysis of available literature, provided by the PNG Eco-Forestry Forum, has

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<sup>1</sup> *Post-Courier*, February 25, 2002, p. 11.

revealed that PNG has some 26 million hectares of forest. Of this, 11 million hectares is suitable for possible commercial exploitation, and 7 million hectares has already been allocated for large-scale export logging.<sup>2</sup>

However, we must not settle for the official, statistical figures. There has been a history of illegal logging, and unreported log shipments, so that it is most likely that many more hectares of forest have been exploited. What is left is the more-inaccessible forest, with low stocking densities, and poor-quality timber.

### **THE VALUE OF LOGGING EXPORTS**

It is hard to know the exact number of logs harvested and exported due to a history of unreported log shipments. What is presented by the log-exporting industry in the reports are the latest statistics. In the mid-1990s, log exports reached about 3 million cubic metres each year. Between 1994 and 2001, at least 18 million cubic metres of logs were exported from PNG, 99.5 per cent by foreign-owned and controlled companies. Moreover, it is difficult to find the real value of the logs that have been exported. Relying on the logging companies' data, it is known that, as a minimum, the value of logs exported from PNG between 1993 and 2001 was over \$US2.3 billion. We have to remember that this figure takes into account only the declared value of the export logs. "If those logs were sawn into rough timber, and processed further into finished products, that multiplication factor could be as much as 1,000."<sup>3</sup>

However, the export volumes have been decreasing steadily to 1.5 million cubic metres in 2002, which coincides with the decline of log value. It is due to the lower quality of logs being exported. "Analysis shows that, even if we give the loggers another 2 million hectares of new concessions, as recommended by the Independent Forestry Review, log export volumes will never rise above the current levels of about 1.2 million cubic metres."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Post-Courier*, May 6, 2002, p. 11

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>4</sup> *Post-Courier*, May 20, 2002, p. 21.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT**

In PNG, logging companies, in collusion with the greediness of our country's elite, have been illegally exploiting and damaging forests. Scientific studies show that loggers in PNG destroy an average of 17 trees for every one that is felled and removed. It is estimated a further 60 are left to wither and die. Besides those areas heavily logged in this way (Western Province and West New Britain), there is another type of environmental destruction taking place: dispersion of wildlife (animals, birds, and insects), soil erosion, causing pollution to the available fresh water, and disappearance of fruit and nut trees, medicinal plants, and traditional building materials.<sup>5</sup>

Another issue, related to logging, is its social impact. In many instances, logging companies have promised to improve the livelihood of people living in affected areas. But, in many logging locations, one finds very poor infrastructure (roads, health services, education facilities, etc.). Sometimes people are left in a worse situation than before the arrival of the logging companies. Apart from that, the presence of loggers seems to be accompanied by moral problems, such as an increase in drunkenness among men, increased promiscuity, prostitution, and a very high level of sexually-transmitted diseases. Are we keeping silent before these affairs?

## **EMPLOYMENT AND CAPITAL: WHO BENEFITS THE MOST?**

We hear, read, or see on media from the National Forest Authority, logging companies, and other sources, that logging is a vital means of reviving the country's economy, boosting infrastructure, and creating job opportunities. Often, such promises are merely an excuse for companies to gain access to peoples' forest resources. Foreign-owned and controlled companies do 99.5 per cent of log exporting. Moreover, those companies spend large amounts of money employing their own fellow citizens. Joe Meave states, "The 17 timber companies in PNG, with a combined log export value of \$US50 million, employed a total of 468 staff. Out of that, only 10 per cent are local employees, who are limited to the most menial

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<sup>5</sup> *Post-Courier*, March 25, 2002, p. 11.

and unskilled positions, such as cleaners, security guards, labourers, and so on.”<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, certain members of the elite community (politicians, departmental heads, businessmen, etc.) are directly or indirectly benefiting from the logging activities. Some could be big shareholders, or chairpersons of the landowner companies in logging concessions. Others could receive large sums of money, under the table, on the condition that they keep silent before this malpractice. For example, in the 2002 elections, some of the candidates, who were in the landowner company associations kept landowners’ royalty money in trust accounts, and then began to give out the funds to the landowners to gain votes.<sup>7</sup> It would also be possible to bribe officials in Foreign Affairs and Labour Departments, so that they would be less strict in checking on foreigners entering the country. It is disgraceful to see the local people suffer from unjust labour, and unequal distribution of wealth. The local people are the rightful owners of their resources, and “just because they are illiterate, that does not mean they cannot benefit fully from these resources”.<sup>8</sup> There is a danger of the rightful owners becoming spectators on their own land, living off the crumbs left behind by foreign companies.

### **MELANESIANS ARE NOT PART OF THE LOGGING ACTIVITIES**

In PNG, 90 percent of the land is customarily-owned, and an increasing proportion of the remainder – which represents land marked by the government to provide for cities and towns, missions, and plantations – is being transferred from foreign to local control, albeit under lease tenure.<sup>9</sup>

For Melanesians, traditionally-owned land does not come under the concept of individualism, or proprietary, ownership. It may sound that way, but the basic understanding is that the land is for the benefit of the

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<sup>6</sup> *Post-Courier*, June 3, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Post-Courier*, May 29, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Post-Courier*, May 20, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Rick Giddings, “Land Tenure”, in D. Whiteman, ed., *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures, Point 5* (1984), Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, p. 149.

entire community, in terms of food, medicine, and building materials. According to traditional Melanesian understanding, supernatural beings are the source of land. Out of fear or reverence, the land, with its resources, is nurtured constantly to maintain good relationships with the spirits. In return, the spirits would protect people from disasters, and make the land fertile, resulting in a good life within the community (*gutpela sindaun*).

The legal and illegal operation of overseas companies that feed the paper and plywood mills of the Pacific Rim are no exception to Melanesians. Since forests provide the basis for their livelihood and cultural life, they see logging as a danger to their rural existence. That is why, sometimes, you hear indigenous people say that a logging company is destroying their life, and tearing them apart. Such statements express the way that the land and the forest embrace the total life of Melanesians. That is why Melanesians sometimes react violently to the logging companies. An example may be seen in Western Province, where the Wawoi landowners have threatened the logging project in their area.<sup>10</sup>

## QUESTIONS

Having provided the factual data, above, I now want to pose some questions, seeking theological answers, from a moral and pastoral perspective. For example: What church teachings speak to the problem of large-scale logging? Where is God in this situation? What is the role of committed Christians?

## THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE: WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S TEACHING?

Scripture has recorded, and apostolic and church tradition has passed on, the faith experiences of our ancestors in faith. Consequently, the church can draw upon that tradition, in taking a stance, with regard to modern-day issues, such as, injustice done by the large-scale logging companies and the PNG elites, environmental damage, unequal distribution of wealth, poor labour conditions, and the right of ownership.

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<sup>10</sup> *Post-Courier*, April 4, 2002, p. 7.

Any foreign company (logging, mining, fishing, etc.) operating in a less-developed nation should resist the temptation of domination and avarice towards the resources of that nation. If they give in to this temptation, they are trying to be masters rather than stewards of the created world. The master exploits creation for his advantage, and undermines the natural integrity of the country. In doing so, the master offends the divinely-established moral order, and threatens human life at its very source. No one, under any circumstances, can claim the right to destroy creation, and dehumanise people (cf. Gen 1:26-28). God alone is the Lord of life, from its beginning until its end.<sup>11</sup>

Justice demands that industrialised nations should contribute effectively to support the need of economic development and social progress in developing countries struggling against poverty and economic disabilities. They should nurture the gift of creation, through their scientific and technical facilities, so as to help the less-developed nations to achieve their own economic and social growth. Besides, industrialised nations should respect the national integrity of the less-developed countries, which often preserve, in their traditions, an acute and vital awareness of the more important values, on which their moral order rests. In other words, as far as possible, national integrity must be developed and maintained, for the temporal and spiritual good of the people.

In any commercial sector (private or public), an important obligation is to create equal job opportunities. People have the right to work, to support themselves and their families, and to be able to acquire goods for their use. The church also teaches about the importance of the common good.

God intended the earth, with all it contains, for the use of every human being and people. . . . Whatever the forms of ownership may be, as adapted to the legitimate institutions of the people, according to the diverse and unchangeable circumstances, attention must be paid to the universal purpose for which created goods are meant. In using them, therefore, a man should regard his lawful possessions,

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<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, New York NY: Macmillan, 1966, pp. 72-73.

not merely as his own, but also as common property, in the sense that they are accrued to the benefit of not only himself, but of others.<sup>12</sup>

Besides, there must be a right relationship between the employers and employees, in terms of wages. It is morally wrong “to pay less than a just minimum wage, to exploit the poverty and misery of the humble, and rob them of a fair return of their labour”.<sup>13</sup> Also, companies must see to it that social benefits contribute to the well-being of the workers, including the entire community. In this way, workers can contribute to their families, their society, and country, and, at the same time, be “sharers in building the future of those, who will come after them, in the succession of history”.<sup>14</sup>

Often, ordinary people are groaning for salvation, because of oppression and injustice coming from the socioeconomic sector. When the State dithers, and does not address moral issues, while its citizens suffer, the church must speak out, in order to “to protect the rights and interests of its people, assuring just wages, safeguarding property, both of owner and workers”.<sup>15</sup> Since, ultimately, the power to rule comes from God, it should be exercised, as the power of God is exercised – “with a fatherly solicitude, which not only guides the whole, but reaches also individuals”.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, respect, justice, peace, and equality would prosper in the “relative rights and mutual duties of the rich, and of the poor, of capital, and of labour, resulting in a much better and happier life among all individuals”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Vatican II, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”, # 69.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 1891.

<sup>14</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 1981.

<sup>15</sup> Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 1891.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

## **WHERE IS GOD IN THIS SITUATION?**

We read in Gen 3:14-24, that God expelled our foreparents from the garden of paradise, because they disobeyed God, by consuming the fruit of wisdom. They wanted wisdom, which does not come from God. By wisdom, we must understand also: money, success, happiness, and long life (1 Kings 3:11). However, God does not want to expel Melanesians, who are suffering from depression and oppression, due to the destruction of their livelihood and cultural heritage by the logging companies. “Can a woman forget the baby at her breast, and have no compassion on the child of her womb? Though she may forget, I will not forget you” (Is 49:15). God’s love is unconditional (Luke 15:11-32), and He is constantly caring for His children, in times of misery and misfortune.

God intervenes, through people of good faith (Greenpeace, PNG Forest Watch, churches, etc.), in promoting awareness of the evil brought about by the logging companies, the elite regime, and the autocratic system of the government. How often, we Melanesians are spiritually blind, not recognising God’s salvific acts in creation! Still, we ask – where is God?

We must accept our human fragility and limitations, and zealously express support for what is just and right, with a heart of faith and trust in God, who is the source of all life. “The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out to God. . . . God heard their pleading, and He remembered His covenant with Abraham . . . and took notice of them” (Ex 2:23b-25). Likewise, God will certainly come to rescue us from our plight. We must remember that the logging situation cannot be, in itself, bad. Human sinfulness makes it bad. The real responsibility lays with us Melanesians to do our part, for justice to prevail. God will complete what we cannot do, and bring it to perfection. Nothing is impossible for God.

## **WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANS?**

As Christians, members of Christ’s body, the church, we are obliged to comply with the pastoral strategies of the church. One such strategy is to defend what is right and just in environmental, economic, and social matters, when basic human rights require it. Committed Christians should seek to understand the struggles of the logging victims, and they should

come to their aid, without hesitation. “Christ, undergoing death itself for all of us sinners, taught us by His example that we, too, must shoulder that cross, which the world and the flesh inflict upon those who pursue peace and justice.”<sup>18</sup> We exist, because God loves us; and, to the extent that we live with God’s life and Christ’s love with us, we are able to strive for what is right and just. If not, we violate not only our loving human nature, but also God’s mandate to be stewards of God’s creation.

Man, thus created, is man as the image of God. He is the image of God, not in spite of, but just because of, his bodiliness. For in his bodiliness, he is related to the earth, and to other bodies, he is there for others, he is dependent upon others. In his bodiliness, he finds his brother, and the earth. As such, a creature, man of earth and spirit, is in the likeness of his Creator, God.<sup>19</sup>

God created human beings, body and soul, and He wills that Christians should minister to the people, in all aspects of life. This should be done in the spirit of humility, because we know that we have limitations, and cannot solve this problem overnight. In addition, we have to do it in the light of faith that God will bring it to fulfilment.

## CONCLUSION

Every Melanesian, whether a “grass roots” or “elite”, should accept the fact that the ills of the logging industry are already affecting Papua New Guinea, and its citizens. We must take a mature and human approach to eradicate them. The problem touches every one of us here and now, because land is of such great importance to us. Land and forest is part of our tribal soul, identity, and unity. Without that, we would not function as whole persons, and would not be recognised by outsiders as uniquely Melanesian. Regardless of differences, we have to put our heads together, in faith and love, to bring to an end the suffering that the logging industry inflicts upon us, before it is too late.

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<sup>18</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 1981.

<sup>19</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 48.

The government has the bigger part in the issue. For the common good, it should protect its forests and citizens, through tough, stringent, clear-cut legislation to deal with, and punish, those who breach the forestry guidelines, rather than giving in to the timber tycoons, for the sake of extra revenue. Today, due to unsustainable management of their country's forest resources, most countries in the world do not have valuable forests like PNG. We, in PNG, are heading in the same direction, which is a way to poverty and human suffering. Moreover, the effect on the socio-economic and political structures of the country will be very damaging. If we do nothing about the evils of today associated with logging companies, along with the greedy assistance of elites within the country, then tomorrow's generation will suffer much, due to our ignorance, denial, and silence.

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