

Masalai i tokaut

Number Forty Nine: 20 November, 2006

Forest Minister tries to gag debate

Rimbunan Hijau's little boy, Forest Minister, Patrick Pruaitch, is resorting to ever more desperate measures to try and silence the debate over Papua New Guinea's notoriously corrupt and destructive logging industry.

After attempts to prevent discussion of key issues spectacularly backfired at last months Forest Law Enforcement Seminar organised by the PNG Forest Authority, the Minister has now demanded that Forestry Officials do not 'participate, facilitate or engage' in any 'seminars, conferences or studies' that are not personally approved by himself.

By acting like a totalitarian dictator and overriding Constitutional freedoms, the Forest Minister hopes to stop any further critical analysis of the abysmal performance of the logging industry. However, now that his scheme has been exposed, Pruaitch will find that he has only succeeded in reinforcing the international perception that he is desperate to cover up the illegal and unsustainable logging and human rights abuses of Rimbunan Hijau and other logging companies.



On November 10, the Forest Minister, Patrick Pruitich sent out an impressively titled '**MINISTERIAL DIRECTIVE**' that demands that the National Forest Board and PNG Forest Authority '**refrain from participating, facilitating, or being engaged in any Seminars, Conferences or Studies that are not duly sanctioned by the Government of PNG through my Ministry**'.

The Directive is addressed to both the Chair of the National Forest Board and the Acting Managing Director of the Forest Authority and it ends with the threat that '**any breach of this Directive would tantamount (sic) to serious disciplinary action**'. Although the Minister is struggling here with his use of the English language, the meaning is clear – don't ignore me on this one or you'll be in trouble!

THE MINISTER'S DIRECTIVE

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MINISTER FOR FORESTS

MINISTERIAL DIRECTIVE

TO : CHAIRMAN – PNG NATIONAL FOREST BOARD
ACTING MANAGING DIRECTOR – PNG FOREST AUTHORITY

DATE : 10TH NOVEMBER, 2006

SUBJECT : UNAUTHORISED SEMINARS, CONFERENCES AND STUDIES RELATING TO PNG FORESTS

As Minister responsible for forestry in Papua New Guinea, I direct that both the PNG National Forest Board and the PNG Forest Authority:

- to refrain from participating, facilitating, or being engaged in any Seminars, Conferences or Studies that are not duly sanctioned by the Government of Papua New Guinea through my Ministry.

Please consult my Office for any future engagement of Consultants that may be conducting activities in regards to the above subject rather an appropriate corrective measures can be taken immediately.

Any breach of this Directive would tantamount to serious disciplinary action.

Thank you,



HON. PATRICK PRUITICH, MP
MINISTER FOR FORESTS

c.c. : Prime Minister
Minister for Environment & Conservation
Minister for Foreign Affairs & International

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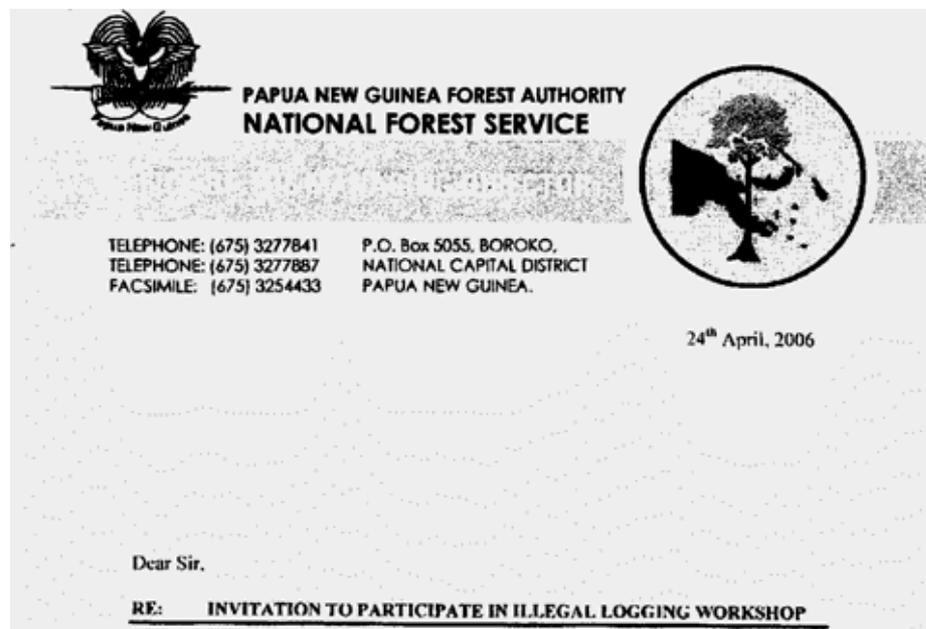
From a legal perspective the Forest Minister has no rights or powers to try and limit the freedom of members of the National Forest Board or the Forest Authority to participate in any seminars, conferences or studies as they wish. The directive is a clear attempt to undermine Constitutional protections and basic Human Rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of movement.

The Minister's directive seems to be a reaction to the farcical handing of last months 'Forest Law and Governance' seminar organised by the Forest Authority and ITTO.

Internationally, the illegal and unsustainable status of the logging industry in PNG is clearly understood and has been acknowledged by such varied sources as the Australian government; the United Kingdom timber trade; the New Zealand courts; Citibank; the British High Commission; AusAID and the World Bank.

Facing this wealth of international condemnation the PNG Forest Authority decided in April to address the issue head on by organising an illegal logging seminar to discuss what should be done to address the problems.

ORIGINAL INVITATION LETTER FROM PNG FOREST AUTHORITY



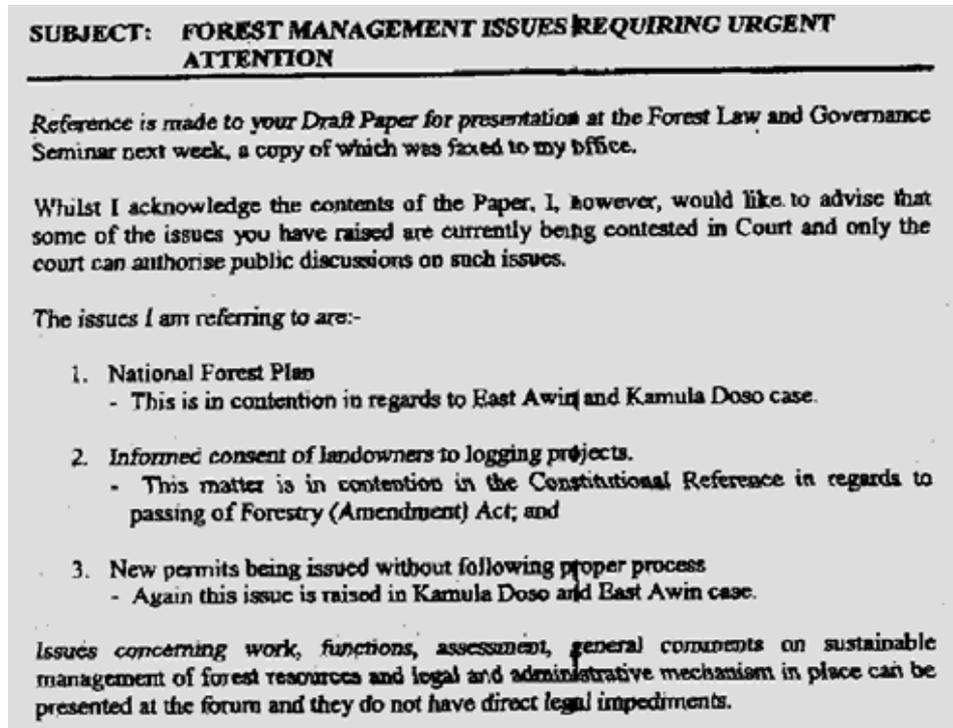
Not surprisingly the Chinese/Malaysian logging industry was appalled by this initiative. While they were spending millions on organising an international public relations campaign through ITS Global to deny any hint of illegality in the PNG forest industry, here was the Forest Authority organising an open debate on the issue.

ITS and the Forest Minister were quickly corralled to get the seminar postponed and then the International Tropical Timber Organisation was brought in to give the whole initiative a completely new face.

With a handy injection of funds from ITTO, the ham-fisted '*Illegal Logging Seminar*' was repackaged as a '*Regional Seminar on Forest Law Enforcement and Governance*'. While that sounded a lot less negative and far more impressive, there was still the problem that participants might try and use the event as an opportunity to discuss the issue of illegal logging in PNG.

To try and avoid the embarrassment of anyone trying to use the Seminar to raise and discuss the real issues around illegal logging in PNG the Forest Authority sent out instructions to the participants with entirely false legal threats suggesting only the courts could authorise public discussion of the key issues.

LEGAL THREATS ISSUED BY THE FOREST AUTHORITY



Of course the strategy totally backfired. All the international observers at the Seminar were given copies of this letter and the NGOs mounted a picket outside the seminar venue. As a result the audience left PNG even more convinced than ever that there was a grand cover-up and that the Forest Minister and senior Forest Authority staff were merely operating under the control of the forest industry.

After this debacle, the logging industry is even more desperate than ever to try and keep a lid on the situation and prevent any further discussion of their illegal and unsustainable logging activities and terrible human rights abuses – hence the renewed pressure on the Minister (who the Chinese laughingly refer to as ‘our little boy’) and his latest outburst.

Clearly our Forest Minister is not prepared to allow objective debate and is not interested in any efforts to ensure greater benefits for the Nation as a whole from the logging industry. Instead he is determined to prevent public servants carrying out their lawful duties. He is also clearly not interested in respecting Constitutional principles or upholding human rights. Most of all, he is clearly committed to defending the illegal and unsustainable practices of the Malaysian/Chinese logging industry.

How much longer is the Ombudsman Commission going to wait before it acts against this man?

Other scandals concerning the Forest Minister

Masalai has previously revealed how Rimbunan Hijau has direct access to senior Government figures and public servants and regularly directs them on how they should act (Masalai 28).

We have shown how Pruaitch has unlawfully manipulated the National Forest Board to protect Rimbunan Hijau from sanction over its illegal logging operations (Masalai 29).

We have also exposed how an independent audit of the Forest Authority accounts found Pruaitch was 'double dipping' and branded him "wrongful, dishonest and corrupt" (Masalai 36).

Earlier this year we exposed how Pruaitch allows Rimbunan Hijau to write his media releases (Masalai 48).