



**5<sup>th</sup> of July, 2014**

**Call to eliminate corrupt and fraudulent land deals in Melanesia**

Members of the Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance (MILDA) today issued a full statement and called for an immediate review of customary land administration in Melanesia to eliminate corrupt land dealings and fraudulent land practices. The group also draws attention to formal government policies of “freeing up land for development” pushed by multilateral financial institutions such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, International Monetary Fund and development partners resulting in alienation of customary land from landowners.

“All customary land acquired through illegal and fraudulent means should be returned to the rightful ancestral inheritors,” said Joel Simo spokesperson for MILDA. “Land for Melanesians is not a commodity but is an inalienable part of our peoples’ very existence. It has spiritual and historical values and other attributes that economists do not consider in their equations,” continued Mr Simo.

The statement by MILDA is in relation to the recent announcement by Prime Minister Peter O’Neill that Papua New Guinea will cancel all illegally issued Special Agricultural Business Leases (SABLs) and abolish the provisions of the Land Act that allow for SABLs to be granted.

“The situation of land grabbing in PNG is one of the worst in the world with over one third of the country now having been appropriated by foreign companies,” said Rosa Koian, Campaigner with Bismarck Ramu Group. “The devastating situation in PNG reveals how land grabs happened with the de-facto approval of the PNG government through its policy of freeing up customary land for productive use. The O’Neill decision to cancel all illegal SABL is a step in the right direction but doesn’t go far enough. We remain concerned that the O’Neil government is now calling on landowners to convert illegal land deals to legal land deals through Incorporated Land Groups. We call on landowners to reject the use of this loophole”, continued Rosa Koian.

The PNG SABL situation is cautionary tale to other Melanesian customary land owners to be alert and mindful of the context of how land registration is taking place across Melanesia. Land registration programs such as the Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs), Special Agriculture and Business Leases (SABL), the customary land registration program in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu Land Program and the Fiji Land Use Decree are some examples of the ongoing push to open up customary land under the pretext that 'development' is better for people than customary land.

“The recent situation of land grab in PNG, should be a warning to countries such as Fiji, said Leo Nainoka of Social Empowerment, Education Programme (SEEP). In Fiji, SEEP is concerned with aggressive Land Use Decree (2010) that attempts to utilize ‘idle’ land through the Land Bank. For SEEP, it is very clear that this decree gives the Prime Minister complete discretion to issue leases of up to 99 years without consultation with landowners, said Leo Nainoka”.

While in Vanuatu the tourism boom in the late 1990's, triggered by an Asian Development Bank (ADB) structural adjustment programme and rash of land sales on Efate, saw many local people marginalised and disposed in the process to develop. In 2005, the Vanuatu Daily Post reported that at least two thirds of Efate, was bought by foreigners. Ministerial Leases over disputed alienated land has risen markedly from 2003 to 2006. These ministerial leases over customary land signed by the Minister as lessor is 21.4% with 29% information missing as indicated by a report from the Justice for the Poor Vol 7. Issue 1.

Today Vanuatu has recognised the importance of maintaining customary land tenure and has taken steps to ensure formal government policies do not alienate customary landowners.

“Land under customary tenure in Melanesia remains the largest employer and has afforded the people their self-reliance and resilience against market forces, and against both man-made and natural disasters. MILDA reaffirmed its commitment to continue to defend indigenous control of customary land – for MILDA customary land systems are the basis of life and community in Melanesia, concluded Mr. Simo”.

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**For more information:**

**Joel Simo**  
**Land Desk**  
**Vanuatu Cultural Centre**  
**Telephone no: + (678) 22129**

**Rosa Koian**  
**Campaigner**  
**Bismarck Ramu Group**  
**Telephone no: + (675) 4233011**

**Leo Nainoka or Chantelle Khan**  
**Social Empowerment Education Programme**  
**Telephone no: + (679) 3100170**

**Full statement can be found on:**

**MILDA website: <http://mildamelanesia.org/news/communal-ownership-land-peoples%E2%80%99-only-safety-net>**