

15th March 16, 2007

Akawini Village Council Press Release

Akawini Village Forest Resources under Siege by Logging Company

We the residents of the Akawini Amerindian Village, Pomeroon in Region 2 are facing the destruction and loss of our forest resources that has sustained our people for generations.

We are faced with this situation ever since the day that we signed an agreement with a logging company by the name of Interior Wood Products Incorporated (IWPI). The representative of this company, namely Basdeo Singh told us in 2004 that he wanted to enter into an agreement with our village to harvest logs. He showed us a draft agreement which he said had the blessings of the Minister of Amerindian Affairs. Also present at this meeting was Peter Persaud who claimed to represent the Amerindian people, Luvindra Sukraj who said that he was a representative of the Guyana Forestry Commission, GFC, Wesley Bell, a Region 2 RDC representative and Lloyd Perreira, Community Development Officer, CDO Region 2 who said that he was representing the Ministry. The village agreed to sign the agreement based on the representation made to us by the officials present. We were placed into groups and given about five minutes to study the agreement though we did not understand the legal language in the agreement.

Shortly after this meeting and the signing of the agreement the Minister of Amerindian Affairs (MoAA) sent the Council a letter stating that she had never seen the agreement that Basdeo Singh claimed had her approval. The Minister also made contact with GFC who said that they also had never seen that agreement. Then in July 2005 Basdeo Singh came to our Village again, this time he was accompanied by Ovid Williams of the MoAA. They said that they had brought an amended version of the first agreement.

At this meeting we told Basdeo Singh that he had lied to us the first time and we do not trust him and therefore we would not sign any agreement. He threatened us that if we did not sign the agreement he would go ahead and work with the old agreement and the royalties would be paid directly to the MoAA. He also threatened to take the Village Council to court. Ovid Williams at this time also strongly stated that if we did not sign the agreement then it meant that we did not respect his office and that of the Minister. Only because of the circumstances under which we were placed we signed the agreement. This, we regret to this day as the livelihood of our people is now threatened.

As soon as the agreement was signed we saw heavy duty machinery such as bulldozers, logging trucks and excavators come onto our village lands. After some time we learnt that the heavy duty machinery belonged to Barama Company and that Basdeo Singh took a sub-contact with Barama Company. This he did without consulting with the Council as required by the agreement. When we confronted Mr. Singh to obtain a copy of the sub-contract he promised to send one but he never did. It seems to us that Barama company which is fully operating in village lands is being sheltered by IWPI.

Small scale loggers mainly villagers were stopped from logging by IWPI by means of an injunction and GFC tags and removal permits are withheld from the village and given to IWPI only. These tags and permits allow us to cut and ship logs and now that we are unable to do so many people have no means of income and cannot provide for most of their basic needs. The Council is also affected since no royalty comes from the small scale loggers. Even the royalty from IWPI the Council does not receive, as this is withheld by the MoAA.

We are calling on the Minister of Amerindian Affairs, The President, The Government and the citizens of Guyana to support us in our efforts to end this agreement which was negotiated with us in bad faith. We ask that the State do all in its power to protect our rights as individuals, as a community and as Indigenous Peoples.

The Akawini Village Council.