

## **The Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance**

By Tim Anderson

10 August 2009

In June, several Melanesian community groups met in Madang, Papua New Guinea, to create a land defence group. The Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance (MILDA) will coordinate efforts in the region to help traditional families maintain control over their own land.

The alliance was initiated by PNG's Bismarck Ramu Group (BRG) and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC), and joined by representatives from several other PNG and Solomon Islands groups. MILDA was launched at the end of a three day workshop.

This alliance is open to individuals and groups from the seven Melanesian countries (Timor Leste, West Papua, Papua New Guinea, The Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kanaky and Fiji) who subscribe to their primary interest - the defence of indigenous land. AID/Watch, the Australian watchdog on aid, is an affiliate member.

Australia's aid body, AusAID, has allocated millions of dollars to 'make land work' and to 'assist' small landowners in Melanesia get better value from their land. However AusAID favours commercialisation of land and MILDA generally sees the agency, along with the World Bank, as collaborating with those same companies which have their eyes on customary land.

Customary landowners - who constitute the great majority of peoples in Melanesia - have been struggling for many years with mining and logging companies, aid agencies and elements within their own governments who want to seize control of their lands.

Modernist arguments persist in claiming these families will be 'better off' if they lease, mortgage or sell their lands. The evidence is to the contrary. No amount of money properly compensates these families for the loss of their valuable, ancestral land. Their children and grandchildren are left destitute.

Similar processes have been at work more recently in Australia's Northern Territory, where Aboriginal people secured strong land rights recognition, after the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. In recent years, Aboriginal people have been forced to lease land, as a condition of receiving ordinary social services.

While Melanesian countries have the highest level of legally recognised indigenous land in the world, these lands are under constant threat. Foreign operators and indigenous collaborators have been finding ways around the Melanesian constitutions, which generally protect customary land and ban or strictly limit foreign ownership.

Vanuatu's main island of Efate has become the cutting edge of this threat, where Australian real estate agents have engaged with corrupt elements to sell dubious 'leasehold' title to much of the foreshore. The Vanuatu capital, Vila, is now

surrounded by 'private property' and 'keep out' signs, something quite foreign to rural Melanesia.

This land alienation undermines traditional livelihoods, by denying coastal families access to garden land and fishing sites. The rents are typically captured by just a few people.

Vanuatu MP and VCC Director Ralph Regenvanu says "the traditional economy is the main economy of Vanuatu", forming a basis for the livelihoods for over 80% of the population. Yet it is neglected. Policy priorities, in the neoliberal fashion, serve the interests of the cash economy and foreign investors. Why do we privilege this small minority? asks Regenvanu.

It is the traditional sector that has maintained food security to the bulk of the population, despite rapidly growing populations and the recent food and financial crises. Many poor countries, whose traditional land systems were more disrupted by colonisation, have faced widespread starvation.

Some clans successfully resist the corporate land grab. The Upper Ramu communities at Sausi, in Madang (PNG), have rejected a large oil palm plantation proposal and developed successful village investment projects. BRG activist Yat Paol points to their commercial success in mobilising their own resources in collective cocoa fermentaries, fish farms and rice production. Women in the Sausi community have been able to buy trucks for their social activities. Their most recent truck was named 'women's sweat'.

MILDA is a long term project. Like a dog after a bone, the opportunists and their backers will maintain their pressure on Melanesian land. This new alliance aims to consolidate the resistance.