

MINISTRY OF AMERINDIAN AFFAIRS REAPING WHAT THEY SOWED

These crooks try to frame me on BOGUS charges - and now their employees are ensnared in REAL charges!

"Do unto others as you would have done to you"

Damon Gerard Corrie

Akawini villagers want out of logging deal-say it was made in bad faith

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The Amerindian People's Association (APA) and the Akawini Village Council are protesting what they call an "exploitative" logging agreement that they were made to sign with a company calling itself Interior Wood Products Inc (IWPI), which is a sub-contractor to Barama Company Incorporated.

At a press conference held at the Raddisson Suites Hotel in Queenstown yesterday, the Village Council said that with the support of the APA, it is considering legal action.

Stabroek News sought an explanation from IWPI and Barama but was not able to establish contact with the former or elicit a response from the latter.

"We the residents of the Akawini Amerindian Village, Pomeroon in Region Two are facing the destruction and loss of our forest resources that have sustained our people for generations," Rudolph Wilson, Deputy Captain of Akawini said.

He said the villagers are calling on the President, the Minister of Amerindian Affairs, the Government and the citizens of Guyana to support them in their effort to end the agreement, which they say was negotiated in bad faith.

Wilson explained that in 2004, representative of IWPI Basdeo Singh told the villagers that he wanted to enter into an agreement with the village to harvest logs. "He showed us a draft agreement which he said had the blessings of the Minister of Amerindian Affairs," he said.

Also present at this meeting were Peter Persaud who said he represented the Amerindian people, Luvindra Sukraj, who said he was a representative of the Guyana Forestry Commission, Wesley Bell, a Region Two RDC representative and Lloyd Perreira, Community Development Officer of Region Two, "who said that he was representing the ministry."

According to Wilson, the village agreed to sign the pact based on the representation made to them 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," he said.

Wilson said shortly after the meeting and the signing of the agreement, the Minister of Amerindian Affairs 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 the GFC which said that they also had never seen that agreement," Wilson said.

He said that in July of 2005 Singh returned to the community accompanied by Ovid Williams of the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs, and stated that they had brought an amended version of the agreement. "At this meeting we told Singh we would not be signing any agreement. He threatened us that if we didn't sign the agreement he would go ahead and work with the old agreement and the royalties paid directly to the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs."

According to Wilson, he also threatened to take the Village Council to court. The Village Council said that because of the threats and the position they found themselves in, they yielded and signed the agreement.

According to the group, as soon as the agreement was signed, heavy equipment arrived on the village land. "After some time we learnt that the heavy-duty machinery belonged to Barama Company and that Basdeo Singh took out a sub-contract with Barama Company. This he did without consulting with the Council as required by the agreement," the group said.

They said that when they confronted Singh for a copy of the sub-contract he promised to send one but never did. Further, the APA and the Akawini Village Council stated that small-scale loggers, mainly villagers, were stopped from logging by IWPI by means of an injunction. They said GFC tags and removal permits were being withheld from the village and given to IWPI only. "These tags and permits allow us to cut and ship and now we are unable to do so," the statement from the joint press conference said yesterday. It added that many people have no means of income and cannot provide for most of their basic needs.

Toshao of Akawini David Wilson said the community was enticed with the prospect of good employment that the company presented to them. He said that employment was promised by IWPI for at least 80 persons from the village, but that turned out to be only 12 persons doing the most menial jobs in the industry for very little recompense. In some cases, persons earn as little as \$17,000 monthly. They were promised, he said, that the 80 persons would be doing skilled jobs for salaries as high as \$80,000.

(Johann Earle)