

Papua New Guinea Villager Receives Major Environment and Human Rights Award for Protecting Forests from Corrupt Timber Trade with China

Paul Pavol recognized by Alexander Soros Foundation Award; Locked in conflict with Malaysian logger destroying virgin forest with impunity to supply global appetite for cheap wood products – from floorboards to coffee stirrers

New York, NY (September 29, 2016)—The Alexander Soros Foundation today announced that it has conferred its annual Award for Environmental and Human Rights Activism on Paul Palosualrea Pavol of New Britain Island, Papua New Guinea (PNG) for his courage and commitment to protecting his community’s land and forests from the illegal and aggressive operations of one of the world’s largest logging companies. The villager-turned-activist’s struggle sheds a spotlight on PNG’s tainted timber trade with China, marked by [rampant illicit activity](#), and fueled by the world’s appetite for cheap wood products.

Since 2010, Paul has spoken out fearlessly against the appropriation of vast areas of rainforest in his home district of Pomio by Malaysian logging outfit Rimbunan Hijau (RH), which is only one of many companies bulldozing PNG’s forests. Though RH—which is [responsible for about one third of all PNG’s log exports](#)—claims to be “a genuine partner in PNG’s nation building process,” its Pomio operations have been met with fierce opposition by locals from the outset.

“The story of Paul’s David and Goliath struggle against Rimbunan Hijau is only one example of the many struggles playing out across PNG’s forest frontier,” said Alex Soros, Founder of the Alexander Soros Foundation. “Major timber importers like China are fueling this environmental and humanitarian crisis as a willing buyer of illicit wood from PNG. Once exported from PNG, this wood is processed into a range of cheap products shipped worldwide. Responsible timber traders and buyers must ensure they can trace their timber back to the forest, and avoid timber associated with the abuses that Paul and his community have bravely spoken out against.”

Home to one of the world’s largest stretches of rainforest, which contain seven percent of the world’s plant and animal species, PNG is seeing increased deforestation as logging and palm oil industries expand following government hands outs of huge areas of land mostly belonging to communities like Paul’s to companies.

Between 2002 and 2011, the PNG government handed out over 50,000 square kilometers of community land using so-called Special Agriculture and Business Leases (SABLS). Though a government inquiry found that nearly all the SABLS reviewed were issued in violation of PNG law, the government never followed up on the investigation, and logging exports supported by SABLS—and timber buyers in China—continue.

“My community depends on our land and forests for our survival, and I cannot stand by and watch it be permanently destroyed,” Pavol said. “I have no choice but to stand up and raise my voice because if we do not defend our land, no one will. We started this fight in 2010, and I am

not going to stop until there is justice and our land is safe. I am thankful that the Alexander Soros Foundation has recognized me for this award, and I hope that this moment is a major turning point in our fight.”

While Pavol and communities in Pomio are being stripped of their assets, RH has exported timber worth more than US\$70 million. [A Global Witness report](#) finds that some 91 percent of the timber felled in PNG makes its way to China. There it is turned into furniture, hardwood flooring, plywood and other wood products. The U.S. is the largest buyer of wood products from China, a trade valued at roughly US\$15 billion annually.

“For many generations, my community has farmed, fished and hunted in the forests of Pomio, all while keeping them healthy and standing,” Pavol said. “In only a few years, RH has clear cut many of these forests, leaving behind a desert in their place. As a result, we’re starting to lose our customs, our culture and our traditions. We know that this is an uphill battle, but fighting is the chance we have to hold on to our way of life.” Some 85 percent of people in PNG live off of what they can grow or collect from forests, rivers and the sea.

Paul’s attempts to protect his forests have been met with threats to his person and reputation. He reports that he and his fellow protestors have been verbally and violently intimidated by police stationed in logging camps. In 2015, backers of the oil palm project obtained a restraining order against Paul, effectively banishing him from moving freely around his village. He is challenging the expropriation of his land in court, but faces delay tactics and mounting legal fees.

“Oppressed by the police, abandoned by his government and equipped with limited resources and little recourse, Paul has put his safety and security on the line to lead a five-year campaign to save his community’s rightful land,” Soros said. “In fighting to protect his community’s land for years with little hope in sight, Paul did not set out to become a hero. He simply wanted to ensure that his family, friends and fellow citizens were able to survive. But his bravery, sacrifice and refusal to be deterred have made him a hero that people around the world should admire.”

[A Chatham House report](#) finds that much of PNG’s timber industry is shaped by corruption and weak forest governance. On paper, the report finds, PNG has advanced forest laws; in practice, these laws have not been implemented or enforced.

“People in Pomio trying to defend their land have faced legal harassment, threats and even violence,” said Cosmas Makamet of FORCERT, a local civil society organization supporting communities in Pomio. “Paul and others have sought justice in the courts, but they’re up against an opposing side with vastly more money. After years of court delays, with trees continuing to fall all the while, communities are running out of money or simply giving up hope.”

The Alexander Soros Foundation Award for Environmental and Human Rights Activism, which annually recognizes activists working at the nexus of environmentalism and human rights, is

chosen by a nominating committee comprising Global Witness Co-Founder Patrick Alley, Human Rights First President Elisa Massimino, human rights scholar Aryeh Neier, Human Rights Watch Executive Director Kenneth Roth, and attorney William Zabel. Pavol is the fifth winner of the Alexander Soros Foundation Award.

About The Alexander Soros Foundation

Founded in 2012, The Alexander Soros Foundation is an organization dedicated to promoting civil rights, social justice and education by making grants to cutting-edge organizations in the United States and abroad. For more information, please visit <http://alex Soros.com/grant-making/>.

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