

Indigenous people are losing their livelihood

„Why should we be producing livestock feed for South Korea when we can't even feed our own people?“ asks Arze Glijo. The Filipino human rights activist is outraged, as more and more land that traditionally belongs to indigenous peoples is being leased over the long term to foreign agricultural corporations. For example, in July of 2009 the South Korean company Jeonman Fedstock leased 94,000 hectares of fertile cropland on the island of Mindoro to grow livestock feed. The 120,000 indigenous Mangyan inhabitants of the island are the losers. Not only are they losing the land that has traditionally belonged to them, but in the future they will be forced even deeper into their mountain refuges in heart of the island by settlers who have lost cropland because of this megaproject.

On the north coast of the Philippine island of Luzon, a Japanese company has concluded a 50-year lease agreement for 400,000 hectares of land to produce biodiesel. Organisations of the indigenous Igorot people protested against the controversial project, but their protests fell on deaf ears.

The same scenario is being enacted in many Asian, African, and South American nations. Indigenous people are being driven from their homes by the leasing of huge tracts of land. The livelihood of the hunters, gatherers and nomads who depend on the forests is being snatched away as their forests are cleared. The clear cutting in the Indonesian province of West Papua in the western part of New Guinea is the worst. Government authorities are leasing hundreds of thousands of hectares of land belonging to indigenous people in this region every year to national and international concerns for planting oil palm plantations to produce biodiesel. In March of 2009, the Indonesian government went so far as to approve the leasing of two million hectares of land to the Saudi Arabian Binladin company for growing Basmati rice for export. The megaproject failed in the face of resistance by landowners, who could not reach an agreement with the company about the lease price. The more than one million indigenous Papuans generally have very little say in the approval of such megaprojects,

although clear cutting affects them most of all. Only in the rarest of cases do indigenous people possess



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deeds to the land that are recognised by the authorities. Although in many cases their ancestors have lived on the land for centuries, these rights were never recorded in the land registries.

■ Violating international law

The leasing of the land thus puts the rubber stamp on the land grabbing that has been going on for some time. The fact that Indonesia ratified the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in October of 2007 is an especially bitter pill for the more than 300 indigenous people of West Papua to swallow. This declaration states explicitly that indigenous peoples have the right to decide for themselves whether their land is to be developed and the raw materials harvested, excavated, etc. But anything can be put on paper and Indonesia is still far from willing to actually grant indigenous peoples the rights to which they are entitled under international law.

Indigenous peoples in Laos, Cambodia and Burma are also complaining about their land being sold off. In northern Burma, small farmers of the Shan people are even being forced by the authorities to work on rubber plantations for the Chinese car industry. Other Burmese indigenous peoples were put under pressure by the government to increase the production of palm oil for export. Famines are a recurring problem in Burma, hence food production for own use should be the number one priority.

In spite of huge tracts of land being sold off, the military regime sees no danger to food security. After all, the land being given away is only fallow land – so says the Minister of Agriculture.

The example of West Papua shows what eyewash such statements are. Ten thousand hectares of West Papuan rainforest are being clear cut for plantations, in spite of the fact that indigenous people have been living off the forest for millennia. If the forest is wiped out, the food supply of these hunter-gatherers will also be destroyed. Without the forest these people may continue to exist physically, but their identity will be destroyed. Indigenous peoples have deep cultural and spiritual ties to the land; to them it is not merely a disposable commodity. It is the abode of their ancestors and spirits. The way of life and the livelihood of many indigenous peoples are severely threatened by their land being sold off. For them such a sale is not a question of profits, but of survival itself.