

Govt shows nerves over NGO role, resources

TWO statements issued from the office of the Minister for Mining appear to show a high degree of nervousness about the activities of non-government organisations.

First, the new Minister, John Pundari, issued a statement “calling on the Government” to consider setting up a governing body to ensure all NGOs in the country work within a set policy framework.

Then he issued a statement quoting his second secretary about a conversation with a private lawyer about the progress of a court case involving the multi-million-dollar Ramu nickel and cobalt mine in Madang Province.

The phone conversation between staffer Simeon Wai and lawyer Tiffany Nonggorr was reported in two glaringly different ways.

The staffer portrayed Ms Nonggorr as having “threatened” to drag out the court case for two years. The lawyer however claimed she had merely been stating the obvious to Mr Wai, that if no attempt was made to meet and talk with the disputing landowners for a solution, that the very government process that allowed for appeals, would result in the case being challenged and the case getting dragged out in court.

She avowed that was not in the nature of a threat, just stating the result of the parties failing to negotiate.

There is a question as to whether the tangle of words resulted from a failure by staff to inform the Minister of the lawyer’s invitation to talk or not.

The other topic, the warning of a need to control NGOs, could be seen as a related matter.

That is because the Government has been critical of NGOs particularly those involved in landowner actions against resource projects. There is none more critical than the current case in the courts over the planned mine waste dumpings in the sea off the Madang coastline.

The Chinese developers have warned several times of the possible harmful effects to their schedule for first production of export ore.

Government leaders, including a private trip to Madang by the Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare himself, have shown a great nervousness about any risk to the Chinese investment.

It would be seen as a great pity by many grassroots people if a project like this was used to introduce possibly draconian controls on the activities of non-government organisations.

Many citizens feel that they are generally powerless against the power structure of the Government and mammoth corporate concerns when trying to express their opinions about the rightness of plans for the use of their land.

The NGOs are often the only voices for such people.

The Government is using the despised tag “foreigners” which can be seen as a PR ploy to make people go against the NGOs.

Minister John Pundari has given a pat on the back to the more respectable NGOs, citing the Red Cross Society, World Vision and others, but looks negatively at “others whose interests were not genuine”.

NGOs should be accountable for their actions if those actions resulted in damages and losses, he says.

“We have to protect our national interest from unscrupulous foreign elements who would be using unsuspecting national NGOs for their own gain,” the Minister says.

Any investor should be subject to following the judicial system of the host nation. In this case, the legal system has taken hold of issues raised by some citizens and is dealing with the matter.

It would be wrong for the Government to attempt to influence those citizens or the NGOs from exercising their legal rights if the idea of suppressing some NGOs was made a part of the government controls system.

Landowners who have taken the action have made it plain: they are not against the mine, just the deep sea dumping method, which has been forbidden for use in other countries.

The consultants’ report provided to the Government has made it plain that deepsea tailings disposal has big risks and cites the Misima and Lihir ventures as cases where harm to the environment is seen.