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Papua New Guinea, Corruption, and Freedom of Information

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10 DECEMBER 2008 PORT MORESBY (Pacnews) ----- The 9th of December 2008 is International Anti-Corruption Day and four years since the United Nation's Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) came into force. This day provides an opportunity for people around the world to raise awareness of the negative impact corruption has on many communities and to challenge entrenched tolerance of corrupt practices. It is a fitting time to step back and recognise that all forms of corruption, "the misuse of entrusted power for private gain" should not be tolerated by anyone.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is one of the 140 countries that have signed the UNCAC. Unfortunately, according to people's perceptions, the rate of corruption in PNG is at a depressing high. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2008 ranks PNG at 151 out of 180 (number 1 being perceived as the least corrupt country and 180 as the most corrupt).

In June 2007, PNG's Public Accounts Committee revealed that "25 – 50% of all public money had been misappropriated or misapplied in the previous five years." One member commented that there was a great deal of doubt over whether PNG could survive if widespread corruption was not wiped out soon, adding, "the signs of civil unrest in deprived areas are already evident." On 23 October 2008, national newspaper Post Courier called for an Independent Commission to assess corruption as soon as possible.

According to the UNCAC, providing the public with access to government information can be a powerful way of challenging corrupt practices. Article 13 requires States to actively encourage members of society to participate in the fight against corruption by providing them with "effective access to information".

Governments are elected by people to act in their best interests. The information that governments collect is done so in the public interest, using taxes that people pay, and belongs to everyone. With access to this information, people can come to understand the reasons for their government's actions and decisions and add their own views. When the public has access to information such as budget plans and expenditure, governments work harder to ensure their actions can withstand public scrutiny.

PNG has made a number of commitments to protect its citizens' right to freedom of information (FOI). As well as signing the UNCAC, PNG has endorsed the Pacific Plan, an important initiative of the Pacific Islands Forum, which in its Good Governance programme highlights the importance of transparency and accountability for development in Pacific Island Countries. The Constitution of PNG explicitly recognises citizens' right to FOI. Unfortunately the Government has thus far failed to deliver on these commitments by passing a law protecting this right.

Recent allegations of corruption in PNG's logging industry provide an example of how much more difficult it is to get to the bottom of the corruption pot in the absence of FOI legislation to bring about increased transparency and accountability. An FOI law would enable interested parties such as landowners and environmental organisations to find out how much money the logging industry is generating, where exactly this money is being channelled, and how logging decisions are made. This money should be used for the benefit of many people rather than a corrupt few. An FOI law would also help to lessen the frustration and powerlessness felt by many regarding the Government's actions, and provide an opportunity to examine the Government's commitment to make good decisions on behalf of its people.

As the United Nations recognised in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, fair and equal development cannot happen unless there is transparency in government and participation by the people who ultimately benefit from development policies. Experience from other countries shows that the enactment of an FOI law is one of the most effective means of protecting this right. This law should acknowledge that people have a claim over the information, and that the government has a corresponding duty to provide it on request. The government should also voluntarily disseminate information of public importance and impose penalties on public officials who wilfully destroy or withhold public information.

This International Anti-Corruption Day, it is important to encourage the Government of PNG to enact FOI legislation as a significant step on the way towards tackling corruption. Such a move will help to ensure that the people of PNG have faith that their Government will not tolerate corruption, and are taking their needs and concerns seriously in a spirit of openness.....PNS (ENDS)