

# Environmental Refugees in PNG

By Simon Albert

**D**aru Island at the mouth of the Fly River in the Western Province of PNG is home to a new generation of environmental refugees.

Families go about their daily life from their home aboard large outrigger dugout canoes. They cook, clean, wash and sleep aboard their floating homes amidst the waste dump that is the Daru foreshore. Amongst the piles of rubbish on the shore other families without canoes live under small tarps just above the high tide mark. The majority of these families have been displaced from their lands in the Fly River, particularly the South Fly and Delta areas, where decades of tailings from the Ok Tedi mine have destroyed their way of life. Since the collapse of a tailings dam in 1987 the Ok Tedi gold and copper mine has dumped contaminated tailings into the Fly River at the staggering rate of 80,000 tonnes per day. For the 50,000 people living in 120 subsistence communities downstream of Ok Tedi the mine has been a disaster. The most immediate impacts of the copper laden tailings have been fish kills in the river, contaminated drinking and bathing waters, increased incidences of skin diseases and shallowing of the river. In addition, during floods the contaminated sediments are carried onto garden lands and deposited. This has proven the most drastic long term impact, with villages no longer able to support themselves from their gardens and all important sago forests. Conservative estimates indicate 1,600 km<sup>2</sup> of forest and garden lands along the banks of the Ok Tedi and Fly Rivers have been impacted by contaminated sediments. This has forced communities to move further from the river (their connection the outside world) or in some cases migrate down the Fly to Daru to wait for compensation payments. These environmental refugees have little employment prospects in Daru and inevitably the town is fast becoming a crime, disease and poverty stricken urban slum. One of the few income streams available to local people is harvesting of mangroves for firewood. What was once small scale patchy harvesting of mangroves has grown to become large scale clear-felling of mangrove forest on Daru and surrounding islands. The poor living conditions in the slums of Daru has led to high incidences of Tuberculosis, Typhoid and AIDS. The connections between the Ok Tedi Mine 500 kms upstream, the ecological catastrophe in the downstream villages and the social disaster on Daru is complex. The mine is principally owned by the PNG government and a complex system of compensation and development assistance exists equating to \$100 USD per person per year. Yet with the mine earning \$1

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billion USD in 2007 clearly more could be done to secure the long term survival of the downstream communities.



Top: Environmental refugees on Daru living in canoes and makeshift tents along the foreshore. (Photo: Simon Albert)

Above: Forest dieback along the banks of the Ok Tedi River as a result of mine tailings, 1996. (Photo: Stuart Kirsch)



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