



Govt told to 'back off' on Kokoda

From correspondents in Port Moresby

October 01, 2006 06:28pm

Article from: AAP

AUSTRALIANS walking the Kokoda Track are "trespassing" on private land and Canberra must not interfere with local peoples' rights to allow mining, says a group of Kokoda landowners.

Their demands for their land rights to be respected are in a letter from leaders and elders of the Naoro and Eberi villages on the famed track.

Their lands are being explored for an estimated \$1.7 billion worth of gold and copper mining potential by Australian company Frontier Resources.

The leaders said they fully supported the company's explorations and the possible development benefits mining could bring to their people who lacked proper health services, schools and good water supplies.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard has called for a stop to any mining around the 96km track across the Owen Stanley ranges where more than 600 Australian soldiers died during World War II.

He said the track was of enormous historic significance to Australia and he would do whatever he could to stop mining going ahead.

The PNG Government said it was too early to be concerned about environmental damage to the track and PNG had strict compliance processes that would ensure historical and cultural sites were protected.

Frontier's managing director Peter McNeil said any mining would be five or more years away and it was not planned to impact on the track itself.

He said he wouldn't be surprised if landowners shut down the track in protest at Mr Howard's attempt to deny them their right to benefits from development such as jobs and mining royalties.

The Naoro and Eberi landowners, who sit on around 10 per cent of the track, wrote their strongly-worded letter with the help of a Frontier resources geologist and its message is aimed at Australia.

They said the sweat and pain that trekkers endured on the gruelling track were what villagers went through every day.

"If the company can help us to alleviate and lighten these hardships we are willing to support them and give them this land to explore and mine with no regrets.

"You are trying to deprive us of such development."

The leaders, including Jack Bani, Sam Dabave, Dick Kibidi, Baguwa Wati and Jack Seven, said the benefits mining would bring would far outweigh that of trekking which benefited track porters and guest houses but not the bulk of the people.

"The trekkers have abused us and called us donkeys when they saw our women carry bilums (string bags) on their heads.

"They want to keep the pristine beauty and preserve the environment and continue to keep us as game for the affluent.

"They do not realise they are trespassing upon private property.

"If we walked into one of these tourist's backyard he would pull a gun at us but that is what they are doing to us," they said.

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