

Save the Sepik: 28 Haus Tambarans reject Frieda Mine Project

Alu J Kalinoe, Post-Courier 9 October 2025

The Sepik River, flowing from its source at the border of West Sepik and East Sepik, sustains over 430,000 people and a diverse ecosystem. It provides food, water, and livelihood to communities and wildlife, shaping the Sepik Basin and defining the region's landscape.

As one of the world's last great free-flowing tropical rivers and a UNESCO Tentative World Heritage Site, the Sepik is both a national treasure and a global responsibility.

The proposed Frieda River Project, which includes the Frieda River Copper-Gold Mine, Hydroelectric Project, Sepik Infrastructure Project, and Sepik Power Grid, is backed by USD 200 million and owned by PanAust Limited since 2014.

The company claims the development will bring sustainable growth to the region. However, affected landowner groups and communities argue otherwise.

Landowners from the Miyan, Telefol, and Payamo language groups are within the Special Mining Lease area, including Sokamin, Amaromin, Wameimin 1, Wameimin 2, Wabia, Ok Isai, and Paupe villages. Communities further downstream, who rely on the river for survival, also stand to be impacted by pollution, displacement, and loss of livelihood.

In May 2020, Clan Chiefs from 28 Haus Tambarans along the Sepik River issued the Supreme Sukundimi Declaration, representing about 100,000 people from 25 villages across Ambunti-Drekikir, Angoram, and surrounding areas in rejection of the Frieda Mine Project.

The Haus Tambaran (Spirit House) is central to Tambaran culture, serving as a traditional men's house for rituals, initiations, and important community decision-making.

The Chiefs expressed their frustration over the lack of consultation and transparency in the government's handling of the mine proposal. The Declaration states: "The government has not carried out any independent research through the members of parliament representing the River People, but insists that the mine will go ahead."

The declaration called for a total ban on the Frieda River Project, citing lack of consultation, transparency, and credible environmental assessment. It stated: "The Sepik River is the life of the Sepik people and should be protected at all costs."

Project Sepik Executive Director Emmanuel Peni has warned that the proposed mine site sits within a seismically active "Ring of Fire" zone, making a large tailings dam extremely dangerous.

According to Project Sepik, the project poses serious risks including:

- Dam failure in an earthquake-prone, high-rainfall area.
- Human rights violations through lack of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC).
- Loss of cultural and natural heritage unique to the Sepik.
- Environmental damage from deforestation, waste, and river contamination.

Since 2018, Project Sepik has led community advocacy to stop the project. In 2020, the East Sepik Provincial Assembly voted unanimously against it. That same year, 10 UN Special Rapporteurs warned of threats to life, health, and food security.

In 2021, Project Sepik and Jubilee Australia filed an OECD complaint on behalf of 2,638 Indigenous members, leading to recognition of community rights to be consulted. In 2025, Project Sepik took the fight to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, calling for accountability from the PNG Government and PanAust.

Through awareness, education, and global advocacy, Project Sepik continues to defend the river, a vital source of life, culture, and identity, against the risks of industrial mining.