



## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **TRAGEDY ON MAZARUNI RIVER NARROWLY AVERTED**

A community outing celebrating the culmination of indigenous Heritage month narrowly escaped turning into a tragedy on the Upper Mazaruni last week. A party of some thirty villagers of all ages from Jawalla set out last week Monday September 24<sup>th</sup> to visit to the site of the famous Karowrieng rock paintings, a journey of some six hours.

With passengers seated on mattresses placed over plastic crates, the boat made its way slowly up the river in the early hours of morning. In the darkness the boat approached a Brazilian 'dragga', a more powerful operation than the traditional dredge. Without warning, the steel cable anchoring the dragga to trees across the river – an illegal practice - rose out of the water. The rising cable scraped the face of the first man at the front of the boat and his cries alerted everyone else. Because of the manner they were lying on the mattresses the cable skimmed above them and no one else was injured. The workers on the river bank raising the cable shouted abuse at the passengers.

Had they been seated in a normal way, the Policy Forum Guyana (PFG) was informed, they could all have been swept into the river or their heads cut off.

Although this particular event had no more serious consequence than a severe fright for the passengers, navigating the Mazaruni between Jawalla and Imbaimadai constitutes a daily hazard for the indigenous communities. Even experienced boat captains are challenged by currents and eddies constantly changing as a result of the sand-banks caused by tailings from mine-sites.

Individual villagers are increasingly fearful of dangers posed by river travel on this stretch of the Upper Mazaruni, which remains the only physical means of communication between these communities and Kamarang where most sub-regional public services, such as police, health, education, mining and agriculture are located.

The Guyana Geology & Mines Commission (GGMC) is too often a by-stander in such situations. Whether its inaction results from being too thin on the ground, or being in thrall to the mining lobby, or impeded by the corruption that seeps like a mist through all levels of mining operations, - including in some communities - is unclear.

Local Toshias and Village Councils rules relating to governing operations of draggas on rivers are not respected by owners of mine-sites who are well aware that communities have little power to enforce them. This sense of impunity has been reinforced by the court judgement which ruled that the rivers belong to the State, not the communities against an attempt by a Mazaruni Village Council that attempted to remove a miner from the Mazaruni.

The need for a more robust legal regime to protection of rivers is patently obvious. Moreover, since those whose lives are most bound up with clean, safe rivers are indigenous peoples, greater authority must be vested in Village Councils to control and manage rivers. Were that the case the rights of indigenous communities to life, health and freedom of movement will be better protected and the integrity of the Upper Mazaruni river better preserved.

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