

DOMINIC KAKAS

Controversy: Posai was appointed Minister for Forests in the Chan Government when former Minister Neville moved to the Opposition benches after the change of government in September 1994. Posai became the centre of controversy when he announced moves to suspend controls on logging which Neville had introduced with a view to limiting the export of logs and to require downstream processing of timber and greater control of the resources by local landowners.

On March 15, 1995, Posai announced in Parliament moves to amend Sections 8 and 9 of the Forest Act to give him more power to issue, suspend, transfer, amend and extend licences or permits. He also moved to relieve Jean Kekedo of her post as managing director of the PNG Forest Authority.

Posai was referred to the Public Prosecutor on January 23 on 30 counts of misconduct in office. The Public Prosecutor's office referred him to the Leadership Tribunal in early April. He was suspended from the office of Forests Minister. Posai applied unsuccessfully to the tribunal to declare that all 30 counts were null and void for non-compliance with the Organic Law on the Ombudsman Commission and the organic Law on Duties and Responsibilities of Leaders.

Posai owns about 4000 ha of forest. When he was appointed Minister for Forests, he was chairman of the local landowner groups that held concessions in the Kandrian district.

□ *Published in The Independent on July 22, 1995.*

PACIFIC INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AWARD 4

Discovering the HIGHlands

COMMENDED: The *Fiji Times* team of reporter Ilaitia Turagabeci and photographer Asael Lave were commended for their report uncovering a drug farm in the Rakiraki highlands where cash-starved villagers thrive on an income from 'grass'.



ASAEU LAVE

By ILAITIA TURAGABECI

THE FOREST was a canopy hiding the trail of Fiji's marijuana belt in the interior of Viti Levu. Dark, forbidding and unknown, except to the guide and the farmer who led us to our first discovery of what is presumed to be one of the biggest and professionally manned marijuana operations in the country.

Only about 50 people have walked this trail. But not all know of the hidden side tracks up the misty and mountainous area we climbed for over an hour. This was where few people dared to go if it was their business. It led up to the hidden secret of a whole village community.

Under the green cover of the jungle, the villagers are cultivating Indian hemp by the day as their main source of income. Cannabis, or *ganga*, regarded one of the world's most controversial plants, is what the villagers have turned to with high hopes of fulfilling their dream. It has taken over as their main crop. And they are not stopping, even though the heat of the law is on them.

Grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, mothers and their sons and daughters grow their own crop with an understanding that overrides the fear of going to jail. When dawn breaks high up in the ridges every morning, the men make their way up to the farms to water the plants; the women and maybe their youngest children often accompany them.

They are warrior people like most clans in Fiji. And their expert jungle trekking knowledge makes their hideouts inaccessible unless being led by a homeboy. Even then, it becomes a nightmarish trek up some steep and slippery paths, at time steps are dug into the near-horizontal hillside for a firm grip.

ILAITIA TURAGABECI

Somewhere in the dense bush our guide suddenly stops and points above a thicket covered by creepers, and we see the top copies of the tallest plant on a small farm, measuring 6 by 3 metres, two metres below the path.

About 60 plants, and those belonging to a 15-year-old boy, a boarding student who grew the plants four months ago to finance his education.

His parents look after the farm while he studies. They plant *dalo*, *yaqona* and bananas around the plantation and make their daily work easier by farming their food and cash crops together. They, like the rest of their relatives, had no alternative but to turn to marijuana for survival in a remote village which a few years ago could only be reached by foot.

The boy's farm was nothing compared to what we stumbled on half an hour later. A clearing in the dense bush revealed a one-acre farm with more than a thousand plants, some more like trees, grown in straight plots. Some standing at two metres, they virtually grew everywhere there was soil, even on a rock cave which had a patch of land on it.

'There are more [farms] around here. But this is the biggest as it has a manpower that no other farm might have. This is our life,' said the 32-year-old farmer, who reluctantly agreed to show us his best guarded secret on the condition of confidentiality.

We have relied on this the last 10 years for survival. Through this I bought my baby's napkins, her medicine, clothes and food when she was born. I built my family a good home and provided them with their every need that nothing else could help provide. I'd rather go to prison knowing they have what they need than going in without leaving anything for them. This is something the law can't decide for me, it's human instinct to give your family the best.

The farmer is married with a four-year-old daughter, he was the first to plant marijuana after being given some seeds in 1980 by the cousin, our guide. His story went back to his younger days when he watched his parents toil on the land planting *dalo* and *yaqona*.

As small kids, we used to work on the plantation. We're a close knit Christian community and our parents always prayed for God's help to ease their daily burden. In this rough terrain, getting the crop to a road and then to town was a terrible experience. We spent almost every day cleaning the *dalo* and *yaqona* gardens but for all the time and hard work there was very little to gain from.

Dalo took six months to mature and *yaqona* was a five-year wait. In between, we just waited, unless there was some other crop that could be

Weekend

The Fiji Times Magazine

Discovering the HIGHlands

The Fiji Times team uncovers a drug farm in the Rakiraki highlands where cash-starved villagers derive an income from grass.

Picture by ASAELI LAVE.

The opening page of the Weekend report in the *Fiji Times* of 16 March 1996.

ILAITIA TURAGABECI

sold. But that changed the day I sold my first plants. I had a couple of hundred for a plant that only grew in approximately 120 days. And I didn't have to struggle down to town for a buyer at all.

My relatives followed suit and did their farming right beside the village as money began to flow in.

That changed slowly in the last two years and everyone knows where their neighbour's farm is. Our villagers collectively guard the forests because lately there has been some stealing going on and we have been forced further inland.

His first harvest was about 90 plants. Then the guide was the only contact with the village. He set up a market that grew over the years and boosted the farmer's pockets like never before. With the money, they built a road up to the village and the first vehicle which travelled that road was to collect marijuana for customers in Suva and Lautoka.

'It was a difficult life at first. We had to build a small bridge to link up our village. Before that, we had to walk for miles before we reached the main road,' he said. The farmer spoke of how they transported a generator through the hills after striking a good deal a few years ago.

'We brought the generator to the village and connected electricity wire to every home. There was a lot of celebration when we lit up the village for the first time,' he said.

Collecting water from a spring in the bush was a difficult task until they bought polythene pipes and brought water into the village. There is water flowing 24 hours in the middle of the village green and the womenfolk can easily do their laundry nearby.

'Our old mothers used to walk all the way to the river to do their washing. It is still being done that way but most people prefer to use the pipe.'

The farmer has farmed three different one-acre areas. In all, he has reaped more than F\$60,000, but this he says, was probably the cheapest price for the amount of marijuana he planted over ten years.

'We sold it by the tree very cheaply. Whatever money we got we used to buy our kids' and our wives' clothes and food. Things got better after several years and we had extra to spend on ourselves and the rest of the family. Now, everyone plants for a livelihood.'

Does he smoke? 'No. But I tried it once only, I wanted to know why people smoked it so I tried it out. I took a few puffs and felt like I was seeing things. I could not go off to sleep.'

Asked if he knew cultivating marijuana was illegal and that the government was spending money on creating an awareness on the effects of smoking it, he said:

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

I know that one day the police might bust me, but sending me to prison will do no good because I will plant again once I come out. What would you do if you have to feed and clothe your family? No one else is going to help me ... no that leaves me to think up the best possible way and this is it. As for stories I've been told that people go mad by smoking this, I'm not so sure if it is true. All the people I know who smoke it are not, maybe if I meet one someday then I'll be led to believe it.

Some grandparents have even dared to take up the younger generation's penalties if they ever got caught by the law. The police have been here before but for some other reason.

'The police know about certain people in our area but we're trying to keep low all the time. We keep a good watch and make sure there is nothing to show,' he said.

The farmer said marijuana laws were too harsh. He added that the justice system did not understand their plight when a father was in prison leaving his family to look after themselves.

But it does not make any difference because the mother and her kids will do the same to survive. What if the law comes and hauls them all in — what would they do with the children? To me it does not make sense. It would be better if the people in charge look into the issue with more understanding.

There is more to this than what they know. And they should know the other side of the story to get that understanding.

By the time the farmer escorts us out of the bush, on and off the beaten track, we lose track of the place to where we've been. To him, it is all the better. The less people know of the place, the more secure his livelihood will be.

And the dense jungle 'forever' hides his farm.

□ *Ilaitia Turagabeci is a Fiji Times reporter. Asaeli Lave is the Times chief photographer. Another reporter, Maraia Kacimaiwai, wrote supporting stories. The Fiji government took action against the Fiji Times for not revealing the location of the village. Home Affairs Minister Paul Manuelli criticised the paper in Parliament, saying it considered itself above the law. But the Times said in an editorial that it stood by its decision not to reveal the location because it promised to protect the identity of the source.*