

## **Veteran International Investigator ‘Bob’ Lindquist Open to Probing Oil Blocks Awards**

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As the opposition PPP/C maintains that it is open to an independent probe of the awards of offshore oil exploration blocks to small, unproven companies during its tenure in office, an internationally recognized forensic auditor is open to taking up the task.

Internationally acclaimed forensic accountant and attorney Robert ‘Bob’ Lindquist, who has conducted wide-ranging probes across the world in search of stashed cash and other property, said he has not been approached by Guyanese authorities but he would consider assisting in consultancy or the provision of forensic audit services here.

Lindquist, when contacted by Stabroek News, said that if he were to be contacted by the Government of Guyana or any independent agency to assist in consultancy or the provision of forensic audit services here, “Yes, I would consider.”

His position comes against the backdrop of Director-General of the Ministry of the Presidency, Joseph Harmon, on Friday saying that the Guyana government would only pronounce on the oil blocks and production if the State Assets Recovery Agency (SARA) hands the administration substance to prove its assertions.

Opposition Leader Bharrat Jagdeo has said that the PPP/C will support an investigation of the award of exploration licenses shortly before the 2015 general elections once it is led by an internationally recognized firm and not SARA, which it believes is biased.

Lindquist has over 40 years’ experience in forensic accounting, assets search, and investor financial fraud and corruption investigations among other experience. Among others, he has assisted victims who fell prey to the infamous Bernie Madoff’s US\$60 billion Ponzi scheme. He is no stranger to the Caribbean and Latin America or investigating oil and gas companies as he also led investigations in Trinidad into the CLICO financial collapse to determine whether it was a case of bad judgement or corporate malfeasance and in Brazil in the case of Petroleo Brasileiro SA, Brazil (Petrobras) et al vs. US Fidelity et al, New York for a surety claim. He has also been involved in the Government of Antigua vs. former Prime Minister Lester Bird in the investigation of political corruption and searched for assets, while over in Trinidad and Tobago, in the Government of Trinidad vs. Minister Johnny O Halloran, a case that focused on corruption and bribery, he was retained to provide services.

“Lindquist provides large case experience without the potential conflict of interest issues. At the same time, Lindquist has available the required resources. Lindquist’s case experience includes: Many high profile investigations on behalf of corporations and governments in United States, Antigua, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Grenada, Guatemala, Hong Kong, Ivory Coast, Jamaica, Netherlands, Malawi, Trinidad, Romania, St Lucia, Switzerland, United Kingdom,” his Curriculum Vitae states.

Former Minister of Natural Resources Robert Persaud is said to be under the spotlight of an investigation being conducted by SARA into how two small companies without the capacity to drill for oil were able to lock down prime offshore acreage near to ExxonMobil's key oil find, days before the 2015 general elections.

Facing growing questions about his role in the awards of oil exploration blocks in the waning days of the PPP/C administration in 2015, Persaud has said that he has nothing to hide but has remained tightlipped on the rationale behind his advice to grant the prime offshore acreage to the two unproven companies, JHI and Mid-Atlantic Oil and Gas Inc (MOGI).

"I have not been contacted by SARA or any other entity regarding the issue of 'oil blocks.' I do support any independent, non-partisan review of the previous and current governments award of petroleum exploration licenses in Guyana's offshore," was Persaud's response to a Sunday Stabroek article pertaining to the issue.

"We have nothing to hide and I do concur with former President Donald Ramotar, who as the then Minister with responsibility for Petroleum, earlier comment on this matter: 'Any unbiased, professional independent review will once more confirm all due legal processes were followed and during the PPP/C time in office the country's best interest was served, given the realities of the day'," he added.

Persaud, who was involved in several controversial deals during his tenure as minister including granting permission to a Brazilian company to carry out mineral surveys in a strategic location close to the border, did not address his role in the awards of the oil exploration blocks even as he mentioned, what he described as the PPP/C's "stellar and transparent" record.

"The PPP/C's achievements and unwavering determination in laying the foundations for Guyana to be an oil producing nation has been both stellar and transparent as well as in full conformity with all relevant laws and regulations," he said.

More than a year ago, on March 25th, 2018, the Sunday Stabroek reported on the concerns about JHI and MOGI gaining access to the Canje block and later farming in big players like French oil major, Total in what would be lucrative deals. Another company, Ratio also secured a deal.

While the APNU+AFC government had taken a hands off approach on these deals, SARA has begun to turn the heat up by announcing an investigation of the awards to the two companies based on whistleblower information.

Such has been the publicity and interest surrounding the probe that JHI and MOGI have taken out whole page advertisements in the daily newspapers to defend the deals.

Observers say that in a farming-in arrangement for the Canje block, JHI and MOGI stand to make extraordinary gains from just having the licence and without the ability to drill for oil. JHI and MOGI have as their principals John Cullen and Edris Dookie, respectively, both of whom had a long association with Canadian oil company CGX, which had been pursuing the drilling of oil wells here since 2000. Observers say that both Cullen and Dookie might have over time become aware that Exxon's ability to accurately pinpoint wells could lead to major discoveries.

For JHI, MOGI and Ratio, there would clearly be interest in locking down areas like Canje and all that had to be paid for a license was US\$2,000 or \$400,000. For this pittance, a

farmed-in major like Total could purchase a large block for a significant payout either upfront or once oil was found. No information has been made public on the financial relationship between the small companies and their partners although it is expected that the Guyana-Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (GY-EITI) should present such information to the public.

Observers say that then President Donald Ramotar and Persaud would have to explain what policy led to a PPP/C government decision to license these small companies, the financial considerations involved and whether it should have been clear to all that such licensing should be to major companies.