
Congo, DR: Doing away with forests, people and climate through logging

DRC's rainforest --the world's second largest-- is disappearing through logging. According to a report from The Guardian (1), "today a dozen large, mostly European, companies dominate the industry and have vast concessions: Trans-M has Lebanese owners; another group, which controls around 15m acres, is owned by the Portuguese Trindade brothers; the American Blattner family has more than 2m acres; the German Danzer Group has 5m. To make worthwhile the tricky task of exporting wood over the rapids near the capital city of Kinshasa, the demand is for the highest quality wood for European kitchens, floors and furniture. Peace has exacerbated the problem, opening up the forest to smaller companies."

Most logging concessions were granted in spite of a national moratorium on logging titles since 2002 and in violation of the new forest laws. The companies know they will be able to appeal, and log, for many years.

The forest provides food, medicines and building materials to two-thirds of the people in Congo --40 million people. DRC's rainforest is also one of the biggest stores of carbon in the world. However, the companies are being encouraged to take what they can. A flawed World Bank-financed review of the legality of 156 logging contracts has otherwise increased the peril as some 46 of the total contracts were converted into legal concessions --33 of which were granted after the 2002 moratorium was already in place. (2) With no social and environmental criteria, the review process ignored the impact on local people's livelihoods. Most concessions were granted in areas inhabited by people dependent on the forest, many have Pygmies living in them, and a third is in areas identified as vital for conservation. Also the global significance of tropical forests in stabilizing climate change and protecting biodiversity was ignored. (3)

In 2003, Safbois, a part-American, part Belgian-owned conglomerate, was awarded a more than 100,000 square miles concession to log the forest for the precious African teak. Local communities condemn the company which they say will profit from their trees while providing little or nothing for them: their hunting grounds are being destroyed, their access to wild food denied, there are few jobs, they pay is meager.

The Guardian's report explains that: "The system of concessionaries offering gifts to communities in return for permission to log is now the basis of the whole forestry operation in Congo. Isolated communities, which have seldom had contact with outsiders, are being persuaded to sign away, for just a few machetes and bags of salt, the rights to the forests on which they have depended for millions of years. One company gave a community 18 bars of soap, four packets of soup, 24 bottles of beer and two bags of sugar. Another signed a deal for 20 sacks of sugar, 200 bags of salt, 200 machetes and 200 spades. In Orientale province, another company promised a school, a clinic and enough wood to provide for their coffins."

"Concessions are being given out, and the villagers are not being told what the chiefs are signing up to. Communities are in chaos and there is more and more social conflict. It is a cruel system that continues the injustices and atrocities of the colonial system but it is even worse because it deprives

communities of their resources and consigns them to perpetual poverty."

A World Bank official spoke anonymously: "Clearly the companies are the root of the problem. They are taking advantage of the chaos. They exploit the poor. It's normal. They are businessmen. It's a very small group of people who get rich and the very large group stay poor. Because the government is weak, it cannot take them on. Nothing much has changed since King Leopold's day. All this started in colonial times. The government continued the same old ways after independence. It's still a system of colonialism."

Companies say they want to take just a few trees, but "to take out just one valuable tree requires roads to be built deep into the forest, which means hundreds of other trees are cut or smashed down - often the very ones that the communities use and need for medicines and foods. The companies do not replant - the trees they cut down may be 100 years old - and they leave the forest vulnerable to floods of hunters and other farmers moving in to pull down more."

The forest is gone forever, and the companies take everything, "including the chance to develop", as a local regrets.

Additionally, industrial logging is also a major contributor to climate change. By churning and compacting the soil logging releases stored gases, and quickens its breakdown when it's exposed to oxygen. When logs are removed from a forest, a high percentage of the carbon remains in the "waste" --dead plants, unwanted trees, branches, stumps, roots-- that decomposes and sometimes is set alight, releasing large quantities of CO₂ to the atmosphere. Logs are transported in trucks that drive thousands of kilometres daily producing millions of tonnes of greenhouse gases. Logs exported as roundwood or converted into planks or woodchips are then shipped to markets abroad in huge tankers that add more tonnes of carbon emissions.

In spite of all the above, the same old colonial concessionary system "is now accepted by the World Bank and western governments. It deprives millions of people of their resources, encourages corruption, prevents development, divides communities and contributes to climate change. The real scandal today is that, for a few square metres of flooring, or a kitchen door, or a bedpost, the second greatest forest in the world is being destroyed, probably for ever".(1)

Sources:

(1) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/sep/22/congo.environment>

(2) <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/press-center/releases2/greenpeace-exposes-impacts-of>

(3) <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/news/carry-on-up-the-congo-2>