
Burma: Selling timber, buying instability, poverty and destruction

Burma, with a population over 40 million, is endowed with a great variation of rainfall, temperature, soil and topography, resulting in many different forest types, from temperate to tropical landscapes that range from the Himalayas in the north and east to the lowland forest, mangroves and coral reefs in the south. Part of Burma's global conservation significance derives from the fact that it contains ecotypes, such as lowland peninsular rainforest, that are already depleted in neighbouring countries. The forests of this region are unusually rich in plants and animals.

The Northern Kachin State, bordering China, is one of the world's most biodiverse areas, but its forests are under threat from illegal, unsustainable and destructive logging. The vast majority of the resultant timber is illegally exported into Yunnan, China. Burma exports both hardwood and softwood species to China.

The value of such illicit timber trade --increased by almost 60% between 2001 and 2004-- has been estimated at US\$ 250 million annually and the volume over 800,000 m³ of timber per year.

As reported by the October 2005 document by Global Witness, "A Choice for China. Ending the destruction of Burma's northern frontier forests", logging companies have built almost 700 kilometres of roads in New Democratic Army (Kachin) territory, to facilitate logging and mineral extraction. On the other hand, logging companies encroach deeper upon Burma's forests in their search for timber as large parts of forest along the China-Burma border have been destroyed.

"Destructive logging of the kind taking place in Burma, leads to a decrease in the amount of timber and non-timber forest products available to the rural population and an increased incidence of poverty. Forest loss also has an adverse impact on water supply and hence agricultural production. This results in food security problems and poverty. Impoverished local communities are more likely to resort to poppy cultivation", reports Global Witness. Burma is today the world's second largest producer of opium after Afghanistan. Drug traffickers have invested heavily in logging businesses as a means of money laundering. Also, logging working conditions on the China-Burma border are very harsh, and loggers turn to drugs as an escape.

Logging is having an adverse effect on both the local population and the environment. The likelihood of flooding following heavy rainfall increases with deforestation. In July 2004, Burma was hit by the worst floods for decades, most likely made worse by logging in the headwaters of the Irrawaddy river. Floods submerged Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State, affecting 3,700 families, with a toll of more than 30 people dead.

After the floods, an officer of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), made clear his views on the links between deforestation and flooding: "He [the general] said ... special care should be taken in such a hilly region like Kachin because deforestation would have a deteriorating effect on natural environment followed by adverse weather conditions, drought and inundation." (The New Light of Myanmar, 26 July 2004)

All in all, logging trade has created a disabling environment: it increased factionalism, corruption, cronyism, intensified ethnic tensions between Kachin sub-groups, entrenched power structures and created conditions under which local warlords have thrived. Quoting Global Witness report: "Revenue generated from the cross-border timber trade with China has funded conflict in Kachin State, led to human rights abuse and to increased poverty. Competition over territory between armed opposition groups, business interests and others, seeking to control the trade is a proximate cause of violence, and a source of instability that has the potential to transcend the border."

It is hard to believe that logging trade is conducive to either stability on the border, development or political progress in Burma.

Article based on: "A Choice for China. Ending the destruction of Burma's frontier forests", Global Witness, October 2005, <http://www.globalwitness.org/reports/show.php/en.00080.html>