
Zambia: the Minister's silence on the timber business

What follows is the editorial comment ("Zambia's forests") of the 30 June edition of The Post (Zambia) which sheds light on the real problems which Zambian forests are confronting:

"The deteriorating state of affairs in our forestry sector should be a matter of serious concern to all Zambians.

The concerns raised by environment and natural resources minister William Harrington about Zambia's ecological and environmental degradation resulting from cutting down of trees for firewood and charcoal deserve the government's urgent attention.

But minister Harrington's revelation that high electricity tariffs are affecting the Zambian government's policy of rural electrification raises more questions. Isn't it the Zambian government that put itself in this position through unbridled liberalisation economic policies?

With the recently announced new energy policy in which nearly all aspects of electricity generation will be privatised we should forget about rural electrification - probably not even in the next millennium.

But it is not only the clearing of trees for commercial agricultural activities, firewood and late fires that should be a matter of concern.

Poor agricultural policies are pushing more and more peasant farmers into chitemene, a primitive and destructive practice that the UNIP government almost succeeded in stopping in the 1970s and 80s. The return to chitemene can be, to some extent, blamed on the government's blind economic liberalisation policies which have led to the shortage, and late delivery, of agricultural inputs.

But there's another, even more destructive, practice which minister Harrington did not mention at all - the uncontrolled or poorly controlled - commercial exploitation of timber, especially in Zambia's Western, Eastern and Southern provinces.

Minister Harrington should know very well how forests are being destroyed in Western Province for Mukwa because he hails from there, but he has chosen to remain silent on this score. Why?

We don't think his silence is a product of oversight or has anything to do with ignorance. Harrington, in our view, has been President Frederick Chiluba's best, or most committed, Minister of Environment.

Timber is big business with gigantic benefits to those commercially involved in it and this is probably why minister Harrington is silent about it - attacking the small men and women dealing in firewood and charcoal.

We are not against well planned and managed exploitation of Zambia's forest potential to the benefit

of our country and its people. But we are opposed to what, for example, is happening to Mukwa in Western Province.

The trees are being indiscriminately cut, without any system for replacing them. It takes 50 to 70 years for a Mukwa tree to mature and Western Province is a semi-desert region - posing a very serious ecological and environmental danger. And, moreover, what are the people of Western Province benefitting from this Mukwa business? Very little, if any. All the money realised from Mukwa sales goes abroad or ends in Lusaka. There are no timber industries, worth talking about, established in Western Province to benefit the local people.

We urge minister Harrington to take a close look at the timber business and its effects on the environment and do something about it."