

Activists urge DR Congo to do more to stop illegal logging

August 13 2014, by Marthe Bosuandole Bulamatari



A forest in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, November 5, 2013

The Democratic Republic of Congo takes pride in recent steps to prevent illegal logging in its vast equatorial forests, but experts argue these measures are far from enough to stop a thriving business.

In the Congo river port of the capital Kinshasa, which serves Atlantic

routes, environment ministry agents have since last year delivered hundreds of certificates of traceability, spelling out the origin and transport details of logs.

The precious documents have opened the way for legal exports of valuable hardwoods mainly to the European Union and to China, while regular buyers and suppliers say that in the past year, it has become much more difficult to trade in uncertified lumber.

"Since the certification process was introduced, I prefer to buy certified wood to stay out of trouble, since agents of the environment ministry watch over the traffic 24 hours a day," said Papy Mubala, an independent trader.

Timber monitors operate throughout the port, but two British non-governmental organisations (NGOs) behind recent surveys hold that this wood is only a small part of what is cut every day, mostly by artisanal loggers.

"Today, we can say that illegal exploitation has been cut back," Environment Minister Bavon Samputu said.

Sustainable management

However, Samputu readily acknowledged that "there is a quantity of wood getting out and which is illegal on the European market".

Almost the size of western Europe minus Scandinavia, the DRC accounts for more than 60 percent of the dense forests in the Congo Basin, often described as the planet's second "green lung" after the Amazon.

But deforestation has increased significantly in the past 15 years,

according to the Central African Forest Commission, an inter-governmental regional body that works for [sustainable management](#) of the threatened woodland.

Innoussa Njumboket, who works for the WWF, says that the government has made real efforts, but it is too early to evaluate the impact of certification. "This is a process that will take five or six years... to lead to good forestry management."

The environment ministry is unable to produce reliable data on the results of the process, which is meant to guarantee to consumers that wood has been through legal channels from the moment it was cut to its arrival.

In a report last month, the British think-tank Chatham House found that "the majority of harvesting in the DRC is currently illegal artisanal logging".

'Widespread illegality'

"Nearly 90 percent of logging in the country is illegal or informal small-scale logging to supply domestic and regional markets, and the volume of this kind of harvest is estimated to have doubled in the last six years," the report concluded.

Independent British NGO Resource Extraction Monitoring (REM), investigating at Kinshasa's request, reported last year that forest management in the DRC was in "a state of widespread illegality," despite "all the efforts undertaken by the state".

President Joseph Kabila's government introduced a new Forest Code in 2002 intended to promote [sustainable forest management](#), including rights for traditional users, and to introduce fairer allocation of timber

concessions.

But enforcement of regulations is lacking and under-funded, according to Chatham House, while the penalties for [illegal logging](#) are too low to deter those hacking down the trees.

"Although nearly all industrial logging and export is licensed in some way, there is plentiful evidence of widespread and serious breaches of regulations in the production of much of this timber," the report said.

Unstable territory

"At present, it is unlikely that any of the DRC's timber production could meet (European Union) due diligence requirements."

A lot of wood passes through the highly unstable east of the DRC, where the state has for years been attempting to reassert its authority in the face of dozens of armed groups that profit from illegal trafficking, according to the UN Environment Programme.

Several times in recent months, Greenpeace has tried to warn France of the suspect nature of wood imported from the DRC, while REM and Chatham House note that the Kinshasa government is focusing on getting a handle on timber destined for export.

The foreign watchdogs commended the government's efforts and intentions, but Chatham House urged Kinshasa and the EU to go on working towards a new legally-binding trade agreement to promote legal logging.

"A huge amount of work will be needed before legality licences can be issued," the think-tank warned.

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