

Mozambique battles illegal logging to save tropical forests

April 26 2017, by Susan Njanji, Adrien Barbier



Tropical forests cover more than half of Mozambique's land mass but China's insatiable appetite for rare woods to feed its furniture industry means the country is being stripped of its slow-growing tropical forests

A squad of Mozambican forest rangers made their first arrest just minutes after arriving at a checkpoint near the northern port city of Pemba.

Nicolau Moises, the forestry department chief in Cabo Delgado province, one of Mozambique's top timber-producing regions, quickly seized a truck piled high with freshly-cut bamboo stalks.

The driver of the vehicle was accused of breaking an annual 90-day ban on [logging](#)—just one tactic in Mozambique's battle against deforestation. That moratorium has been extended a further three months.

Tropical forests cover more than half of the southern African country's landmass but China's insatiable appetite for rare types of wood to feed its furniture industry—and an uncontrolled surge in logging—means Mozambique is being stripped of its slow-growing tropical forests while some hardwood species are facing extinction.

The London-based Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) estimated that in 2013, at least 93 percent of logging in Mozambique was illegal—and that most of the illicit timber ended up sold in China.

"For the past five years we have seen illegal logging increasing," Environment Minister Celso Correia told AFP. "It's been a big challenge for the country."

'Limbs cut off'

Corruption, weak laws and ineffective institutions, coupled with inadequate resources to fight illicit logging, have left the country's forests unprotected.

But Correia said intelligence-gathering has proven to be particularly important to the fight.

"Our communities, our institutions are very vulnerable to corruption," he said. "It's really organised crime. So it's a different fight. It will not be

normal institutions that will win this war."

He estimates that illegal logging costs Mozambique more than half a billion dollars (around 460 million euros) a year.



The government said that more than 120 timber companies were raided in March alone and at least 150,000 cubic metres of logs were seized during the sting operation

To tackle the crisis, the government has launched a slew of measures that include a ban on the export of all unprocessed logs and a five-year moratorium on the exploitation of vulnerable species.

New logging permits will also not be issued until at least 2019.

"There was no regulation in the past, but now we have managed some strong regulations," said the minister. "And we have increased our capacity of command and control on the field."

But the work of policing the sprawling country's vast forests is "complicated," Moises said. "We don't have sufficient means, we don't have enough personnel" to deploy in the forests where the trees are sawn down.

"It's like we have our limbs cut off."

According to Correia, more than 120 timber companies were raided in March alone and at least 75 percent were found to be involved in illegal activities.

At least 150,000 cubic metres (5.3 million cubic feet) of logs were seized during the sting operation.

After making their first arrests, Moises and his team raided a Chinese-run timber export firm where hundreds of logs lay stacked, ready to be shipped eastward.

But everything was found to be in order.

"We are following the law and we never (export wood illegally)," said Rothschild Xu, a Chinese timber trader, who has been working in Pemba for five years.

There are dozens of Chinese logging companies in Mozambique—and some operate outside the law.

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