
Liberia: the silent destruction of the forests

Seldom are there news arriving from Liberia. This country, located in the West African region, with shores on the Atlantic Ocean and bounded in the West by Sierra Leone, Guinea in the North and Ivory Coast in the East, ranks amongst the world's poorest countries and bears the weight of a huge foreign debt. An accelerated process of environmental degradation -including forests- is also affecting the country. Several activities -as mining, plantations and logging- are destroying the dense tropical rainforests.

Some of the multinational companies involved in this destruction have been operating for long time, while others arrived during the last few years. Their subsequent onslaught has intensified the unsustainable and reckless exploitation of the country's natural resources, already affected by loss of biodiversity and soil erosion.

The Liberian-American/Swedish Company (LAMCO) is a joint venture that has been mining and exporting iron ore from Liberia for more than three decades. The company suspended its operations in the '90s due to civil war. LAMCO is responsible for large-scale deforestation as a result of its opencast mining methods, railway construction for the transportation of the ores and setting up miners' camps.

Rubber plantations are another direct cause of deforestation. Firestone Rubber Plantations, the world's largest rubber plantation company, originally owned by the American Firestone and now in the hands of the Japanese Bridgestone, has caused large-scale deforestation as well as the pollution of the Farmington River and several creeks relied upon by rural communities for drinking and fishing. Additionally, thousands of peasants were forced to migrate to work in these plantations and their communities condemned to poverty. The Liberia Agriculture Company (LAC), which is the second largest rubber plantation company in the country, operating in the Gran Bassa county, is also to be blamed for deforestation at a big scale (see WRM Bulletin 29). Additionally, the company has been at the centre of controversies for years, with allegations ranging from abuse of workers' rights -including child labour in hazardous tasks- to tampering with Justice. In January 1999 riots occurred when about one thousand angry workers who protested in front of their managers were violently repressed.

One of the recent arrivals is the Malaysian-owned Oriental Timber Company (OTC), closely related to the President himself, which will have exclusive rights over the last remaining closed canopy tropical rainforest within the so called upper Guinea Forests. This region is the habitat of several endangered and some endemic species. These high forests, that are either sacred for local people, proposed for game/forest reserves or as national parks, still remain unprotected. Additionally, OTC will set up a timber processing plant, will manage one of the two major seaports in Liberia and will also be granted governmental contracts to build roads into its operational area. This company has also got a bad record abroad: it previously caused environmental damages in Guyana and in the Congo Democratic Republic, while was denied an operation license in Ghana before moving to Liberia. According to Mr. Eric Passawee, President of the Liberian Loggers Association, OTC " . . . makes the state and people vulnerable to environmental threats...". He also stated that the company operates under the

protection of the country's President.

The initiative "Action Now!" recently launched by the Save My Future (SAMFU) Foundation to counteract this dangerous state of affairs, aims at creating awareness and supporting the struggle of grassroots organizations and communities to protect the country's resources. For more information about this project, please contact: Silas Siakor at ssiakor.unlirmon@server.unog.ch

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