Congo, D.R: The oil palm invasion has started

Born to independence in 1960, the Democratic Republic of Congo has lived since then amid fighting. Its former colonial ruler Belgium, as well as the US, the EU and international financial institutions such as the World Bank have been key hidden actors and interested parties in a scenario where ethnic rivalry has caught the world attention, while hiding economic struggles over the riches of a country which was the world's largest cobalt exporter, the fourth biggest diamond exporter and ranked among the top ten world producers of uranium, copper, manganese and tin.

The civil war that ravaged the country from 1998 to 2002 and was followed until now by renewed fighting was to a large extent aimed at securing the interests on diamonds, gold, coltan, cobalt, ivory and timber. Not only nine of Congo's neighbouring states were involved in the war but also a number of western countries, either supporting the rebels or the government.

A complex web of western companies with direct and indirect vested interests in the region have tried to hold control of the country's natural resources: Anglo American, American Mineral Fields, Barclays Bank and De Beers from Britain; Texaf, George Forrest International, Petrofina and Union Minière from Belgium; Tenke Mining Company from Canada; Bayer A.G. from Germany; America Mineral Fields, Cabot Corporation and Brown & Root (a branch of Halliburton) from the US, to name just a few.

The war, waged and armed by foreign commercial interests, was at the cost of the local impoverished population. It left the country with a death toll of up to 3.8 million.

Forest peoples such as the Mbuti, Sua, Aka, Efe, Ituri, Batwa, Luba, Mongo, Azande, Bangi, Ngale, Rundi, Teke, Boa, Chokwe, Lugbara, and Banda have lived in those lands from ancient times. They were not consulted when the colonial powers grabbed their territories or during neocolonialism, when similar actors kept on holding power. Industrial logging, agroindustry, and conservation projects have not only rendered no benefit for them but also implied the eviction of forest and forest dependent people. It is estimated that 6 million people have already been displaced in the country, where about 40 million people in a population of 62.6 million depend on the forest to survive. Millions have kept dying, mostly through starvation and disease. Living amid the most commercially valued goods on the world, they have become mere victims and subjects of humanitarian aid.

Though fighting has continued in certain parts of the country Congo has now an elected President --Joseph Kabila-- confirmed by a general election held in 2006. According to a recent report by BBC News "Mr Kabila has enjoyed the clear support of western governments such as the US and France, regional allies such as South Africa and Angola and businessmen and mining magnates who have signed multi-million dollar deals under his rule."

The recent emergence of China as a serious rival in the contest to reap the rewards of high commodity prices has radically changed the picture. According to a report by John Farmer and Ann Talbot, "China has established itself in Congo by providing US$8 billion for infrastructure projects and mining operations. This deal will give Chinese companies control of several important copper and

cobalt mines. Since the Chinese investment was announced, President Kabila has been courted by every government that fears its interests in the Congo may suffer."

The table is served. There are still millions of hectares of valuable tropical forests --ironically spared from devastation by years of war-- ready to be plundered. Linked to industrial logging, forest areas are also planned to be used for the plantation of oil palm monocultures to feed the booming agrofuel market for European and US cars, as well as for China's insatiable demand of palm oil.

Despite the countless testimonies that can be found in Colombia, Cameroon, Indonesia, Ecuador and many other countries about the impacts of large scale monoculture oil palm plantations and on how they deprive communities of their livelihoods, the mainstream rhetoric keeps on advising that it is good to plant such monocultures. For instance, UN Economist Dr Schmidhuber has said that DR Congo could devote millions of acres for agrofuel feedstock including oil palm. Keeping a blind eye on how the process works everywhere else, he also says that environmental concerns would be less of an issue in DRC, since large areas of arable land lie outside rainforest zones. Not only does such argument ignore the presence of people living in or depending on those areas, but it also proves consistently to be wrong. The reason is simple: what makes oil palm plantations really profitable is to gain access to forest areas, log the forest, sell the timber, and then plant the oil palm with the resulting revenues.

The destructive process has already begun. In October 2007, a Chinese company signed a billion-dollar contract to establish more than 3 million hectares of oil palm plantations in the country. The oil palm invasion has started and the forests --spared from destruction by war-- will now be destroyed in peace.

Article based on information from:

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