
[Liberia: New Forestry Law raises hopes and doubts](#)

Similar to what has happened in several Southern countries harassed by centuries of colonialism, the wealth of Liberia has also been its curse. Tropical forests account for 47 per cent of Liberia's land. Between 1989 and 2003, revenue from forests was used to fund a brutal conflict fuelled by the pillaging of forests. Timber was a key resource for Liberia's armed factions. Wood flowed out; money and arms flowed in. So many concessions had been corruptly awarded that they totalled more than the land area of Liberia.

In July 2003, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Liberian timber exports. The blocking of timber exports brought an end to logging, and to former president Charles Taylor, who fled the country and now awaits trial in The Hague on war crimes charges. Guus van Kouwenhoven, a Dutch businessman and member of Taylor's inner circle who ran the notoriously rapacious Oriental Timber Company (OTC), is already in jail for breaking the UN arms embargo.

Following those years of destructive civil war, illegal lumber trafficking and massive fraud to fuel conflict, Liberia passed a forestry law on October 9, 2006, in line with new policies drawn up with the United Nations. The new legislation will allow implementation of Liberia's first-ever forestry policy, which FAO helped develop with numerous international partners (the United States, the European Union, the World Bank, IUCN, and Conservation NGOs including Conservation International, Flora and Fauna International, a number of Liberian NGOs and industry) through the Liberia Forest Initiative.

According to Silas Siakor, the 2006 Goldman Environmental Prize Winner for Africa, the new law, which has led to the lifting of UN sanctions, is promising –if it can be enforced.

The law sets aside 30 percent of the forests as reserves, and guarantees that local communities will have to approve all timber concessions and will receive 30 percent of the revenues. But there's a smart twist -- those revenues will come from property taxes, not extraction fees, so the incentive is for the local communities to make sure there is no overlogging to ensure that the land isn't devalued and that the payments continue indefinitely -- a model considerably better than how the U.S. treats its own national forests!

There will be also forests available for commercial concessions. The law stipulates that people with a history of involvement in war, corruption and malpractice are barred from that option. However, many of the businessmen who gleefully raped Liberia's forests in return for favours are still there, looking after their other interests and keeping an eye on logging opportunities.

And not only nationals. At an International Tropical Forest Investment Forum held in Cancun, Mexico, on April 26, 2006, US Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary For Environment Daniel A Reifsnyder, enthusiastically announced: "We are putting our support and action behind Liberia". He remarked that "This Forest Investment Conference will focus on many aspects of attracting investment to the natural tropical forest." There is the trade interest behind glamorous sentences like "progressive forest management" and "conservation policies aimed at truly making the utilization of forest

resources more sustainable". The US officer said that "investors can both earn a profit and maintain forest resources for future generations." Is there any example of the Big capital doing that, please?

Article based on information from: "Liberia enacts new forest policy with UN help to ensure benefits for all", UN News Service, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=20146&Cr=liberia&Cr1=>; New dawn for Liberia's 'blood forests', Richard Black, Environment correspondent, BBC News, e-mail: Richard.Black-INTERNET@bbc.co.uk, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/science/nature/6035617.stm>; "Issues and Opportunities for Investment in Natural Tropical Forests", Daniel A Reifsnyder, Remarks to International Tropical Forest Investment Forum, Mexico, April 26, 2006, <http://www.state.gov/g/oes/rls/rm/2006/65800.htm>