
Peru: Illegal logging – a source of forced labour in the Amazon

Logging is highly selective in the Peruvian Amazon. That is to say, out of the great diversity of species only a few are used, causing reductions in the existence of some species. The consumption of certain woods – such as mahogany – does not forgive even reserve zones.

Illegal logging taking place in these zones resorts to various strategies ranging from extraction contracts in the so-called buffer zones (roughly 15 km wide strips surrounding the reserve area, which help the loggers to pass off the timber logged in the reserve as coming from the buffer zone), to permits for river transport inside the reserve of timber supposedly logged outside the reserve. Timber is also “laundered”: it is legalized by sawing it with a belt saw to remove the marks of chainsaws which are prohibited as they imply a great waste of wood and papers are drawn up as if the timber were to come out of the zone under contract.

The noise and visibility of these activities, involving people established in well-known, permanent camps, flat barges that transport timber, and cranes, make this illegal activity anything but clandestine. In the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve, located in the triangle formed by the joining of the Marañón and Ucayali Rivers, it has been observed that an average of 20 men work in each camp and there are about 50 camps operating annually.

It is precisely in this sector of illegal logging where labour systems abound that are associated with non-payment, remuneration in kind, prostitution of women in logging camps and sub-human working conditions.

Twenty-first century slavery takes place under the name of forced labour and its victims are the most underprivileged – children, women, and native communities. Those who seem to be invisible. Competitiveness drives the companies to seek cost-cutting in production processes and so these modalities of exploitation occur that should offend peoples' consciences.

Isidoro Chahuán, a chain-saw operator from the Quichua ethnic group told us “I work for soap, salt, a cartridge, a shirt.” He is what is known as an authorised worker. In the Amazon, over 30 thousand Peruvians from the most distant indigenous communities are in the same inhuman situation. A report for ILO on forced labour in timber extraction in the Amazon by the anthropologist Eduardo Bedoya and the social science expert Alberto Bedoya, tells us of up to three ways it occurs. In two of them the common denominator is the system of inflated debts and meagre pay for the timber extracted. Although this is a long standing phenomenon going back to Colonial times, with the cedar and mahogany boom the timber industry has had to gain ground and for this reason has entered virgin territories, community reserve zones, national parks and localities where non-contacted or incipiently contacted groups reside.

The most frequent case is that of the “authorizing logger” linked to large logging companies, handing out a quantity of money in the town to “trapping bosses” to obtain timber. These offer money or advance food or goods (such as rice, salt, rifles, chainsaws, etc.) to the indigenous communities under the condition that the community members, who know the area and its trees better than

anyone else, deliver cut timber. Generally these agreements are made through verbal or written contracts, where no reference is made to the market value of the timber, which the indigenous people are unaware of and they are easily deceived. Thus, when the workers deliver the timber to the “trapping boss” he argues that the timber is no good and arbitrarily reduces payment. As the money is not enough, the indigenous people ask for further loans and increase their debt. Peasants are “trapped” and even sign ten-year contracts.

In the case of logging camps, workers are gathered, usually from outside the communities, to extract timber. The report explains that in the towns they are given an initial amount of money to recruit them and then they are taken to work in the most remote zones of the Amazon. These regions are too distant for them to escape, their documentation is taken from them, they are far from the canoes and they are threatened that they will not be paid if they attempt to run away. The salaries are very low and goods are very expensive. A soda water at a logging camp can cost 10 soles (3 USD), a small sack of sugar 50 (15 USD), a sack of rice the same amount. Thus the vicious circle of debts is started “The major problem at these camps is the incapacity of the workers to mobilize. Labour inspectors do not reach them because of the inaccessibility of the area. The inhabitants cannot pay their debt by seeking another camp as in many cases they receive physical threats” says Bedoya. This is forced labour as there is a loss of freedom.

In many cases, those ending up in a logging camp, formed by between 10 and 40 workers, take their family with them. The wife cooks, the children help but no one is paid. According to this study, there is a high rate of teen-age boys and women are found as cooks and prostitutes, earning planks of wood for their services.

This is the timber curse. Fooling the peasants is not hard for the “trapping bosses” who work for the authorizing loggers, who in turn work for large logging companies. They only have to take advantage of the misery generated by the very system of timber exploitation that has depredated their local economies, displaced the communities from their lands or harassed them in, taking away the forests that were part of their subsistence for food, medicines and housing.

The great forestry business thrives under these miserable conditions, in close connivance between legal and illegal activities to the point of merging together, and in some cases even enjoying the endorsement of certification seals.

Article based on information from: “30 mil peruanos son víctimas de trabajo forzoso en la Amazonía”, Gabriel Gargurevich, Diario La República, May 2005, and “Controles y descontrol: Extracción ilegal de madera en el Pacaya-Samiria”, Alberto Chirif, Actualidad indígena Nº 99, March 2005, Servicio de Información Indígena SERVINDI, www.servindi.org, sent by Carlos Arrunátegui, FAdAmazon (Fundación de Adhesión con los Pueblos Amazónicos), e-mail: carrunategui@fadamazon.org; “Esclavos de la madera”, Jimena Pinilla Cisneros, El Comercio, <http://www.elcomercioperu.com.pe/EdicionImpresa/Html/2005-05-12/impCronicas0305152.html>