
Liberia: An Update on its Forest Reformation Process (Post Mid Term Sanctions Review)

As reported in past WRM bulletins, Liberia's forests have long been exploited to fuel conflict in this small West African country. Liberia houses the last two blocks of the upper Guinea Forest, which is known to be home to over 2,000 flowering plants, some 240 of which are timber species, and 60 of which have been commercially harvested.

Since the 1990's Liberia's forests have been plundered by rebels and dubious logging companies, and even used by the former president to fund war not only in Liberia, but also in Cote d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone. In recognition of the role of timber in Liberia's civil war, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) imposed timber sanctions on Liberia in December 2003 and in December 2004. Upon reviewing the National Transitional Government of Liberia's (NTGL) progress on achieving forest reforms, the UNSC extended sanctions on Liberian timber for another year which were upheld during the mid term review in June 2005.

In a recent report by a Panel of Experts (PoE) working on behalf of the UNSC, corruption within the NTGL was reported widespread. Reports from the ground paint a picture of the usual suspects making a final grab for resources prior to the upcoming government elections, to be held in October 2005. The PoE report indicates that the NTGL has done little to meet the criteria developed during an international reconstruction conference at the United Nations (UN), held in February 2004. This includes criteria necessary for the lifting of timber sanctions.

The Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Coalition of Liberia recently claimed, in a letter to the UNSC, that the NTGL has accomplished "virtually nothing as regards to reestablishing its authority over key natural resource producing areas". Currently there are approximately 4,000 people now living inside the boundaries of Sapo National Park, one of the only two nationally protected forest areas. While many Internally Displaced People (IDP) have sought refuge in the forests, many former rebels have set up illegal mining camps within the boundaries of the park. Along with these illegal mining camps come small communities that set up "business" to earn what little money they can to survive. All too often these temporary communities increase the demand for bush meat, further deteriorating an already fragile ecosystem. IDP's have recently raised their voices to the unfairness they have suffered as they see former rebels, who murdered and raped their neighbours, receive \$300 to put down their arms and are given free education while the people who suffered at their hands receive nothing.

The NGO Coalition has also claimed that some of the UNMIL personnel, whose mandate is to "assist the transitional government to establish proper control and administration of natural resources in Liberia," have not only failed to live up to this mandate but that some personnel even appear to be operating in cooperation with illegal timber operators. As an example, pit-sawing was banned by the FDA in 2000, but it continues to occur with permits of dubious origin; the Managing Director of the FDA claims his signature was forged on the permits issued in 2003-2004. The PoE, in collaboration with the local NGOs, reported that trucks with sawn timber passed through check-points, late at night, with the tacit support of some UNMIL personnel. There are also allegations that UNMIL personnel

have been involved in the trading of gold and diamonds coming from illegal mining sites.

The good news is that a recent review of Liberia's timber concession system concluded that a clean slate is needed and that all existing forest concessions agreements should be revoked. According to the NGO Coalition, the review committee worked against formidable odds, conducting the investigations with the highest of standards and delivering the results on time. The results must now be approved and forwarded on to NTGL President Bryant for approval. Many of the concessions were allocated by former president Taylor with no regard to any national forest laws.

While this is certainly good news to the people working on forest reform in Liberia much remains to be done prior to beginning any type of concession allocation system. An ecological survey conducted in 1978 recommended protection for Lofa-Mano National Park, Sapo National Park, Cestos-Senkwehn National Park, Nimba Nature Reserve, Wonegizi Mountain Nature Reserve, Cape Mount and Coastal Forest nature Reserve and Cavally Nature Reserve. At that time only one of these areas was offered protection, and since the cease fire another one was agreed due to pressure on the transitional government. It is critical that the forests of Liberia are audited to better understand the state of the ecosystems, and the people that depend on them, prior to creating any type of sustainable forest management plan.

The World Bank and the IMF have been actively involved in Liberia's reconstruction process; however Liberia has arrears of over \$3 billion dollars, which prohibits the country from receiving any further Bank loans. In May of 2005, the IMF published a report stressing that Liberia urgently needs external assistance and private investment and that any new assistance would be dependant on actions to strengthen institutions, reduce corruption and improve governance. The IMF noted that Liberia's economy grew by 122% within two years of the 1996 peace treaty and that during this same period logging increased by a startling 1300%. The Banks' Country Re-engagement Note (CRN) points out that forestry, since 1977, has attracted much of the foreign direct investment and logging has been the largest provider of foreign currency. Furthermore, in the proposed re-engagement strategy key issues in Liberia's recovery are identified as economic management, forest management infrastructure rehabilitation and community development and the bank also claims that these are areas that the Bank has gained significant experience in other post-conflict contexts. This information signals the vast interest of Liberia's forest by the World Bank and sounds the warning bell to those working on forest reform that the Bank must be watched. It is critical that the Bank does not "cut and paste" policies they have used in other African countries aimed at helping corporate interests and making life worse for forest dependant communities.

As the NGO Coalition and the PoE point out, little progress has been made towards the NTGL establishing control over Liberia's natural resources and business as usual continues. The PoE suggested a private management organization should be contracted to implement the forest sector reforms that have been outlined by the NTGL and the UNSC prior to any sanctions lifting. It is unclear what the next steps will be and whether this recommendation will be implemented. This suggestion obviously raises serious concerns from civil society and discussions are underway to determine how best to deal with the latest recommendations. The situation on the ground is difficult at best. If this recommendation is implemented, it will be critical that the selection process for hiring any such private organization is completely transparent and includes civil society and local communities at every step of the process.

While Liberia is not unique in its use of natural resources to fuel war, it is in a unique position to ensure the adequate protection of this biodiversity hotspot and the creation of a truly sustainable forest management plan that includes community participation throughout the rebuilding of this

shattered country. Let us hope that the UNSC and the international community provide the space for this unique opportunity.

By Michelle Medeiros, Friends of the Earth US, E-mail: MMedeiros@foe.org