
Liberia: "Logs of War" arrive in Italy

On March 31, in the Italian port of Ravenna, Greenpeace activists uncovered a shipment of rainforest "conflict timber", a term defined by the British-based NGO Global Witness as "the timber that has been traded at some point in the chain of custody by armed groups, be they rebel factions, regular soldiers or the civilian administration, either to perpetuate conflict or take advantage of conflict situations for personal gain".

The activists branded the logs by painting them with slogan "Logs of War" since they came from the Liberian company Maryland Wood Processing Industries (MWPI), whose President has been linked to the illegal trade of weapons according to an expert panel report of the UN Security Council. The report gave evidence of the Liberian logging industry's role in the illegal arms trafficking business which in turn fuels regional conflict in West Africa.

Additionally, a report produced by Global Witness has produced new evidence of the continuing links between the logging industry and illicit arms trade to Liberia. The report reveals that the President and chief shareholder of MWPI, Abbas Fawaz, has helped oversee the importation of weaponry into Liberia through Harper Port, which is under the management of MWPI. In 2002, Fawaz brought weapons that were destined for use by Liberian-backed rebels in Cote d'Ivoire. He is a close associate of Liberian President Charles Taylor.

In April 2002 Greenpeace had confronted the Italian Timber Importer Federation about the presence of conflict timber on the Italian market. After several meetings, the Federation members agreed to stop the import of timber from companies linked with the illicit arms trade and illegal logging operations. However, timber imports from Liberia continued, as shown by this shipment.

Not only has the Italian timber industry failed to take into account the UN Security Council evidence, but also the same UN Security Council has failed to impose sanctions on the Liberian timber industry. A new discussion on UN sanctions on Liberia is scheduled on May 7th in New York.

"The Italian government said it would be in the front line against terrorism and international insecurity, but at the same time Italy is still importing timber which is fuelling the civil war in West Africa and the illegal arms trade," said Sergio Baffoni, Greenpeace forests campaigner.

This exposes that international timber trade is built on the massive demand for cheap and plentiful tropical timber in the consuming markets of the North, mainly the US, the European Union and Japan. Italy will soon lead the European political process to control illegal logging and trade, through the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance & Trade (FLEGT) agreement. Greenpeace will be calling on all European governments to end their role in the trade of illegal timber coming from ancient forest destruction or linked to armed conflicts.

However, a question remains open: is there any legal logging at all? (See WRM Bulletin N° 53.) From a government perspective the answer is yes, but for the customary owners of the forest, all industrial logging is illegal, because it fails to recognise their rights as owners and custodians of the forest.

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