Suriname: Chinese Logging Companies and Tribal Rights

Chinese logging companies are relatively new arrivals in South America. In Suriname, at least two have been operating since 1997. The widely reported ban on domestic logging in China, in part prompted by devastating flooding related to forest loss, is one obvious reason for the internationalization of Chinese logging. According to Surinamese government statistics for the years 2000-01, Chinese loggers were by far the largest producers of round wood and China was by far the largest export destination for Surinamese round wood, exceeding the next highest destination fourfold.

This short article looks at one area of Suriname where the Chinese have set up operations, the impact of those operations on the Saramaka people, one of the six Maroon tribes living within Suriname's borders, and the measures the Saramaka have taken to seek respect for their rights. Maroons are the descendants of escaped slaves who fought themselves free from slavery and established viable, autonomous communities along the major rivers of Suriname's rainforest interior in the 17th and 18th centuries. Their freedom from slavery and rights to lands and territory and the autonomous administration thereof were recognized in treaties concluded with the Dutch colonial government in the 1760s and reaffirmed in further treaties in the 1830s.

The Saramaka people are one of the largest Maroon tribes, amounting to around 20,000 persons living in over 70 villages located along the Suriname River, one of the main watercourses in the country. Ownership of Saramaka territory is divided among a number of matrilineal clans. Members of the clans have rights to hunt, fish, farm and gather forest produce in the area owned by their clan, but ownership remains vested collectively in the clan. Despite this, Suriname presently maintains that the Saramaka, and other indigenous and maroon peoples, have no rights to their lands and resources, all of which are owned by the state and can be exploited at any time.

The Saramaka first became aware that part of their territory had been granted to a logging company when the employees of a Chinese company calling itself NV Tacoba arrived in the area in 1997. When they challenged the company, the Saramaka were told that the company had permission from the government and any attempt to interfere with its operations would be punished by imprisonment. A Chinese company calling itself Jin Lin Wood Industries surfaced in the area in 2000. This company has relations with Ji Sheng, another Chinese company operating in Saramaka territory. A concession of 150,000 hectares held by Chinese company, NV Lumprex, was also recently discovered in Saramaka territory. Lumprex and Tacoba are ultimately owned by China International Marine Containers (Group) Ltd., a company registered on the Shenzhen Stock Exchange. This company uses the timber to make wooden floor boards for shipping containers. Finally, a Chinese company known as Fine Style is also operating in Saramaka territory.

Concessions held by the Chinese companies, which were granted without even notifying the Saramaka, are presently guarded by active duty Surinamese military personnel armed with military issue weapons. According to eye-witnesses, these companies have caused widespread environmental damage and substantially restricted the Saramaka's ability to use their forest resources. One Saramaka eye-witness, for instance, stated that "The soldiers told me: 'Leave the

Chinese, go hunting here (in an area where the Chinese have finished cutting already). But don't let the Chinese see you.' Well, I went there: there was destruction everywhere; the forest was destroyed. In Paramaribo [the capital] people don't know what the Chinese are doing. Should not someone control the logging-activities of foreign investors? The Chinese cut hundreds of trees, dragged them to a place and piled them up there. They abandoned them in the forest because they did not need them anymore. For us, people from the interior, it is terrible to see cedar trees cut down that are so important for us. And all this destruction made the animals flee away also."

After discovering that their territory had been given to logging companies, the Saramaka began organizing and held a series of meetings. They decided to file formal complaints with the Suriname government asking that the concessions be revoked and that their rights to their territory be legally recognized. Three complaints were submitted between October 1999 and October 2000, none of which received any response. Faced with silence and increased logging activity, the Saramaka decided to seek the protection of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and filed a petition there in October 2000. This petition cited Suriname's failure to recognize Saramaka rights to land and resources as defined by the American Convention on Human Rights and active violation of those and other rights due to the logging and mining concessions granted in Saramaka territory.

On August 8, 2002, the IACHR issued a request to the Government of Suriname asking that it "take appropriate measures to suspend all concessions, including permits and licenses for logging and mine exploration and other natural resource development activity on lands used and occupied by the 12 Saramaka clans until the Commission has had the opportunity to investigate the substantive claims raised in the case." This request, technically called precautionary measures, is intended to protect the Saramaka people from human rights abuses and environmental degradation caused by logging companies operating in Saramaka territory while the IACHR conducts an investigation of the situation and are only issued in extreme case that pose an immediate and irreparable threat of harm.

This request was issued after the Saramaka had highlighted the urgent need for the IACHR's immediate intervention in order to avoid irreparable harm to the Saramaka people's physical and cultural integrity caused by the logging activities. Writing in support of IACHR intervention, Dr. Richard Price, an anthropologist and leading academic expert on the Saramaka, wrote that without immediate protective measures, "ethnocide – the destruction of a culture that is widely regarded as being one of the most creative and vibrant in the entire African diaspora – seems the most likely outcome." And, "The use of Suriname army troops to "protect" the Chinese laborers who are destroying the forests that Saramakas depend on for their subsistence, construction, and religious needs is an extraordinary insult to Saramaka ideas about their territorial sovereignty. … Their presence in the sacred forest of the Saramakas, with explicit orders to protect it against Saramakas, on behalf of the Chinese, is an ultimate affront to cultural and spiritual integrity. By unilateral fiat, and through the granting of logging and mining concessions to Chinese companies, the postcolonial government of Suriname is currently attempting to expunge some of the most sacred and venerable rights of Saramakas. In this respect, the destruction of the Saramakas' forest would mean the end of Saramaka culture."

The case filed by the Saramaka is the first time that either Suriname's failure to recognize indigenous and tribal territorial rights has been challenged in an international human rights body. If successful, the case may represent a precedent that will benefit all other indigenous peoples and maroons in Suriname. The case is presently pending a decision on the merits by the IACHR. The Saramaka have requested that the IACHR make itself available to mediate a friendly settlement that will hopefully result in a negotiated settlement withdrawing the logging concessions and recognizing Saramaka territorial rights. Failing that they ask that the case be submitted to the Inter-American

Court on Human Rights for a binding decision.

To-date, Suriname has failed to respond in any way to the allegations made in the petition despite repeated requests from the Commission to provide information on the case. Also, despite substantial press coverage of the IACHR's request for precautionary measures, Suriname has failed to take any action to honour the request or to protect the rights of the Saramaka to their lands traditionally occupied and used.

By: Fergus MacKay, Coordinator, Legal and Human Rights Programme, Forest Peoples Programme, e-mail: fergus@euronet.nl