
Liberia: The long chain of responsibility in forest destruction

Liberia is a biodiversity rich country with rocky cliffs and lagoons facing the Atlantic Ocean, with plains covered by forests and savannahs, and rainforests in the highlands, crossed by rapids and waterfalls, all of which are home to the Kpelle, Bassa, Gio, Kru, Grebo, Mano, Krahn, Gola, Gbandi, Loma, Kissi, Vai, and Bella peoples. The evergreen and semi-deciduous rainforests of Liberia also harbour many and even rare and unique plant and animal species.

Despite all its wealth, Liberia is an impoverished country, burdened by a large external debt. As such it has been conditioned to follow the path of so many other southern countries: to sell its resources. Nature has become a commodity and as such is being not used but abused along the lines of market demand: forests are now Liberia's second largest foreign exchange earner.

Forest clearance by caterpillars and bulldozers to "prepare" the field for cocoa, coffee, rubber and oil palm plantations; mining for gold, diamonds or iron ore usually using open cast polluting methods; road building to access commercially valuable trees; logging and deforestation; are the activities through which forests are being siphoned to meet consumerist demand mainly in European and US markets, where high living standards allow people to indulge in luxurious whims. Big corporations through concessions and even encroachment, implement the destruction.

Recently, a Greenpeace action has put on the table the Liberian issue, denouncing Greek Shelman company of being one of the gateways into the European Union for imports of West African timber. Greenpeace activists boarded the company's vessel to find logs suspicious of coming from the notorious Malaysian Oriental Timber Company (OTC), which controls the Liberian port of Buchanan. OTC is accused of corruption, illegal logging and participation in the cross-border arms trade that has fuelled the civil war in neighbouring Sierra Leone. Shelman boasts on its website of being "a world leader in African wood products" for hardwood flooring made of valuable species including mahogany, iroko, aniegre, limba, and denies knowingly buying from OTC, but declined to make any comments on Greenpeace's accusation.

Liberian forests are being depleted, and there is more than one responsible for that. It's not only the government seeking cash, but also those at the final end of those goods --Northern consumers-- and in between, the trade companies and the financial sources providing funds for the whole process.

When talking of forest conservation at international conferences, will all the involved countries --from Liberia and Sierra Leone to Europe and the US-- take on their share of responsibility and agree to take the necessary steps to address the issue?

Article based on information from: "Greece is latest gateway for rape of Africa's rainforests", The Independent - United Kingdom; May 2, 2002, by Daniel Howden; Investigative Report on Oriental Timber Corporation - Special To The Perspective - The Perspective, March 20, 2000, <http://www.theperspective.org/otc.html> ; Greenpeace Exposes Greek Links to Liberian Ancient Forest Crimes, 22 March 2002, <http://www.greenpeace.org/pressreleases/forests/2002mar22.html>

