
Congo, Republic: Increased logging activities

The Congo Basin contains the second largest area of tropical rainforest in the world after the Amazon Basin. Renowned for its high biodiversity, this forest is also home to culturally diverse peoples who depend on forest resources for their livelihoods. The Republic of Congo (Congo Brazzaville) is one of the countries situated in the Congo Basin, with approximately 21.5 million hectares of forest. The country has recently emerged from a bitter civil war, during which timber exploitation was dramatically reduced, and as stability has increased in the region, exploitation of natural resources has also increased. Timber companies are eager to resume, or begin, exploitation of the resource-rich forests of Congo Brazzaville, and forestry operations in the south of the country have resumed, with the remote primary forests of the north, which were largely unallocated prior to the civil war, now also being allocated for timber exploitation.

Logging operations will increasingly disrupt the lives of local people, especially Pygmies, who depend on the forest for their livelihoods. As the north is being opened up to logging operations, the demand for bushmeat to supply workers' communities will increase and will contribute to the impoverishment of forest opened up by roads. This will have dire consequences for Pygmy groups who use forest areas for their subsistence activities. Pygmies generally find it difficult to obtain reasonably remunerated employment in logging towns, and they face discrimination from Bantus. Unless efforts are made to involve Pygmy people in the management of their forests and for them to share in the profits gained, future generations are likely to feel cheated of their heritage.

An expansion of the timber industry is also facilitated by the policies pursued by the government to liberalise their economy. With the support of the IMF, Congo Brazzaville will liberalise its natural resource sector to maximise profits, and to those ends a new forestry law was introduced in 2000. Henri Djombo, the forestry minister, has estimated that the log production in Congo Brazzaville will double, or triple within the next two to three year period.

As a result of government policies to liberalise the economy, new allocations have been made and large scale logging operations are now underway in the northern regions of Sangha and Likouala. German owned Congolaise Industrielle des Bois (CIB) is the largest forestry operator in the country (1.15 million hectares), but other companies are also moving in to secure their position in the profitable industry --particularly in the previously unexploited north regions. The following is a list of some of the most important companies involved in Northern Congo (March 2001), including each one's concession areas (in hectares):

Bois et Placages de Lopola (BPL): 199,900 ha
Congolaise Industrielle des bois (CIB): 1,150,516 ha
Cristal: 213,200 ha
ESBO: 163,466 ha
Industrie de Transformation des bois de Likouala (ITBL): 422,195 ha
Likouala Timber: 525,500 ha
Mokabi SA: 370,500 ha
Société Congolaise Arabe Libyenne (SOCALIB): 448,000 ha

Société Industrielle Forestière de Ouessou (IFO): 1,131,600 ha
Thanry-Congo: 461,295 ha.

Companies are also investing in increased logging activities in the south. For example, the Portuguese company FORALAC recently reported an investment of eight billion F CFA (USD 11.4 million) and the creation of 500 jobs in its concessions. In addition to established European companies, Oriental companies are also now investing in Congo Brazzaville. For example, the Chinese company Man Fai Tai recently bought logging machinery and equipment from the Malaysian company Innovest. On January 18, 2002 Innovest announced that they entered into an agreement with Man Fai Tai Congo Ltd S.A.R.L to sell machines and equipment that were purchased in 1997 for the logging concessions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (ex-Zaire) and the Republic of Congo. Man Fai Tai has three logging concessions in the south of Congo Brazzaville.

As a result of the expansion of forestry activities, Congo Brazzaville is emerging as an important supplier of tropical timber to Europe; and Germany, for example, has increased its imports of timber from this country. Species exported from Congo Brazzaville include Sapelli and Sipo. The commencement of logging in the north has also provided the impetus to build new roads linking with Cameroon and the Central African Republic, and all timber from the northern regions is exported via Douala in Cameroon, making it difficult to estimate exactly how much timber is being exported from Congo Brazzaville.

At a meeting in Paris in March 2002, Henri Djombo, the Congolese forestry minister recognised that illegal logging was occurring in tropical Africa. He further stated that in order to fight illegal logging and introduce sustainable forest practises, democratisation must be encouraged, and funding must be made available to tackle the problem. He cited his country as an example of how lack of access to resources results in weak government control of the forestry sector. Djombo explained that the government of Congo Brazzaville only has 300 agents and foresters, when at least 2000 are required to do the job.

In conclusion, the situation is changing rapidly in Congo Brazzaville, and export of timber is up from the low caused by the civil war. The government is actively pursuing an export oriented economic strategy, and aim to double, or even triple log production. At the same time as concessions are being granted and companies are starting their operations, the Minister responsible for the forests has recognised that illegal logging is taking place, and that the government are lacking human resources to effectively oversee the industry.

By: Forests Monitor,