
Cameroon: French companies' illegal practices in the forest

When described by European officials, the world seems to be divided in two different sets of governments. "Their" world appears to have taken on board environmental --and even social-- concerns, while "corrupt" Southern governments continue destroying the environment. Such simplistic picture does not take into account that the causes of environmental destruction in the South are very frequently rooted in the North. The following example helps to better understand the issue.

According to a Friends of the Earth-France report, the Cameroon Ministry of Forests and Environment, has recently published the names of forestry corporations guilty of infractions in 2001 against Cameroonian forestry regulations. Among the primary portion of these corporations are French forestry conglomerates that have been repeatedly condemned for their illegal dealings.

Three cases concern the Doumé Affiliated Forestry Company (SFID) of the French Rougier Group. The SFID was condemned for exporting assamela timber, protected under Cameroonian forestry rules, having neither requested nor obtained a permit to do so, as well as for the falsification of documentation of the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora treaty (CITES). As a result, a two-million CFA-Franc fine (amounting to merely 3049 Euros) has been levied. Evidently, little resulted from this first condemnation, and thus a new case was brought against the company addressing the same infraction with the same financial penalty, 2,000,000 CFA Francs. The SFID was condemned in a third case in 2001 for having exceeded their export quotas by 33% (an excess corresponding to a volume of 17,653 m³ of wood).

The French group Bolloré has been also found guilty of being involved in illegal activities. The SIBAF affiliate of the Bolloré conglomerate was fined four million CFA Francs (6098 Euros) and had its rights to export assamela wood suspended for also having falsified CITES declarations. The SIBAF had already received a fine in 2000 to the tune of 9147 Euros for faulty materialization of cutting boundaries. Another Bolloré affiliate, the Campo Forestry Company (HFC) was condemned for exceeding allowed cutting boundaries and hacking directly into protected areas. The amount of the penalty in this case has not yet been decided.

Incredibly enough, while the SIBAF and HFC conglomerates are regularly fined for their infractions against Cameroonian forestry legislation, they have enjoyed financial support from the French Development Agency to carry out "sustainable forest management plans" since 2001. Only the French financial support given to these corporations seems, in certain monetary provisions, to motivate these companies to develop forest management plans. As the Cameroonian law mentions that companies have to develop a management plan, Friends of the Earth-France holds that such costs must be entirely assumed by corporations. The French aid, in the Congo Basin forest sector, must be reoriented such that it will no longer serve French commercial interests, but rather real economic benefit for local populations while protecting dense humid tropical forest ecosystems and their extraordinarily rich biodiversity.

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