
Cambodia: Logging ban and what else?

As we had reported in our last bulletin (December 2001), the possibility of a moratorium on logging was looming on Cambodian timber industry's horizon, which had previously attempted a "voluntary restructuring process" that proved to be a failure.

It has been evident also that it's not simply a problem of illegal logging. The fierce exploitation of timber resources by large-scale projects developed by big foreign companies has led the country to an unbalanced ecological state that was responsible in 2000 for the worst flood suffered by the country in 70 years, as denounced by the United Nations.

The alleged profit returns from forestry activities become null when accounting the ecological losses: it is estimated that the flood cost the country US\$156 million. This compares to the total of US\$92 million which was generated by the forestry sector between 1994 and 2000. Even the Asian Development Bank had to recognise that the Cambodian forestry sector is a "total system failure" in a 1999 report.

And now, national and international criticism to the destruction of Cambodia's forests have finally born fruit. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has announced the suspension of all logging operations, effective from 1st January 2002.

However, there is a question open: the logging ban is a means towards what ends? Will it imply a policy change for a community based ecologically sustainable forest development and protection? Or just a pause to appease criticism and later return to the same predatory logging industry model?

Cambodian's authorities should bear in mind that there can be no economies without ecosystems.