Open letter to the UN and its institutions and initiatives related to forest issues

On the occasion of March 21st, proclaimed by the UN General Assembly as International Day of the Forests (1), the World Rainforest Movement (WRM) and more than 300 signatories call on the General Assembly and UN Institutions and Initiatives related to forest issues to use the new initiative to address the underlying drivers of deforestation.

The letter is motivated by the fact that in spite of several UN initiatives aimed at calling attention for forests at the international level, the process of deforestation -affecting especially tropical forests- continues and the proposed solutions have not slowed down tropical forest loss worldwide – on the contrary.

21 March 2013 – the first ´International Day of Forests´

An appeal to urgently halt forest destruction, addressing the underlying causes

The UN has launched one more initiative to call attention to the fate of the world´s forests: 21 March from 2013 onwards will be the International Day of Forests. But will the Day make any difference to the forests and people who depend on them, considering that the UN International Year of Forests in 2011 went largely unnoticed?

Indeed, the UN should lead the measures to halt tropical deforestation, and therefore it should know and appropriately address the causes of forest loss. The most important direct causes of deforestation are quite well known, and include logging, the conversion of forested lands for agriculture and cattle-raising, industrial tree plantations, urbanization, mining, oil and gas exploitation, hydroelectric dams and industrial shrimp farming.The underlying causes that drive deforestation, however, are multiple, interrelated, less easily visible, and often little discussed and understood. A thorough process of analyzing underlying causes of deforestation, undertaken in the late 1990s by the UN with significant civil society participation, concluded that these drivers of deforestation are related to land tenure, resource management, trade, international economic relations in general and social exclusion.

The FAO claims that deforestation was lower in the period 2000-2010, compared with the previous decade. Still, 13 million hectares of mainly tropical forests, including mangrove forests, were destroyed each year in this period; and the actual figure is likely to be even higher because FAO continues to consider industrial plantations as forests. By defining “forests” as any land with a certain quantity of trees on it, the FAO distorts the data: the real forest loss appears lower than it actually is because for the FAO, industrial tree monocultures are the same as diverse forests that provide home and food for forest dependent peoples.

The International Day of Forests comes in the wake of renewed international attention to tropical forests that started with climate negotiators putting the role of forests in climate change on the

agenda of UN climate talks: since 2007, the UN climate summits have been debating REDD – Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation. But have the efforts put into REDD+ resulted in reduced deforestation or at least a reversal of the current trend? Have the many initiatives undertaken since REDD emerged slowed the loss of forests worldwide? Are mangrove forests ("blue carbon") less degraded today than they were in 2007? Are forest peoples' rights better protected today than they were in 2007? Have the pledges of Northern governments to contribute US$ 7.7 billion, as well as the renewed attention itself for forests internationally really been able to slow, and eventually halt the loss of forests?

Recent reports from Brazil and Indonesia, the two countries where most of the forest was lost during 2000-2010, indicate that after a short dip in the rate of deforestation according to FAO statistics, deforestation is going on and many new forest areas are under threat of large-scale corporate-driven activities that destroy forests.

Those same actors involved in forest destruction are often at the same time involved in projects that allegedly aim to protect forests, for example through REDD+ projects. These actors include transnational corporations, Northern but also Southern governments, financial market institutions including the World Bank, big conservation NGOs and certification organizations.With the UN at the forefront, all of these key actors defend the so-called "green economy",presented as a "win-win" approach that tackles both the economic-financial and environmental crises, by redirecting investments to unlock so-called "natural capital", as well as new, supposedly clean technologies (such as those based on biomass) and the "carbon market", as well as the trade in "environmental services" in general. In tropical forest countries, this is leading to increasing conflicts, human rights violations and resistance. The destruction, if anything, has increased, not decreased, let alone stopped.(1)

Forest destruction must be halted – urgently!

This letter is an international appeal that forest destruction needs to be urgently halted – and not just "reduced". Forests are vital for forest peoples, whose way of life depends on them. An indigenous leader from Eastern DRC states: "*The forest and the indigenous peoples could be described as inseparable friends. The life of a pygmy depends 100% on the forest because the forest is our home 'par excellence'. I can state that without the forest, there can be no life for indigenous peoples*".(2) Halting deforestation and the recognition of land rights are of special importance for indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation. An increase in land grabbing, much of it in forest areas, and the ongoing destruction of forests, particularly through the "concession model" of logging, agriculture and mining, put at risk the continued voluntary isolation because most often the areas where peoples in voluntary isolation are able to still survive on this planet and maintain their way of life are the very areas targeted by land grabbers.

Halting forest loss is also crucial to combat social exclusion and to respect the rights of Nature and its intrinsic value. Furthermore, forests are important for humanity in general, especially the populations in tropical forest countries. It is extremely concerning that forests are increasingly affected by the effects of climate change. The perpetuation of the current unsustainable production and consumption model is at the root of both, the climate and forest crises. Initiatives aimed at truly halting deforestation – or avoiding runaway climate change – will therefore need to address these root causes.

To halt deforestation, the underlying causes that drive forest loss need to be eliminated. Urgent actions needed towards this end include:

– Recognition of the rights of forest and forest-dependent communities over their communal territories with special attention to the indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation; these rights must include the right to control decisions affecting the territories of forest dependent communities.

– Define forests by their true meaning for forest-dependent peoples; exclude industrial tree monoculture plantations from the definition: ***Plantations are not forests.***

– Expose and halt the destruction caused by transnational corporations (TNCs) and other actors who lead the land grabbing process; the past decade has shown that TNCs cannot be regulated: their existence and increasing influence are a main threat for the future of tropical forests.

– Expose and break the pattern of corporate-driven false solutions like ´sustainable' large-scale activities in tropical forests, REDD+, trade in environmental services, public-private partnerships, certified "green economy", etc.. Instead, propose and defend true solutions which mean defending locally sustained economies, in terms of the use of for example minerals, biomass and energy. We reiterate the call of the international Oilwatch network: ***Leave the oil in the soil and the coal in the hole!***

– Support efforts to consume less forest destroying products instead of initiatives that promote buying the certified products from large-scale operations and companies that continue to destroy forests.

Above all, on this first International Day of Forests we call on the UN and its forest-related institutions to heed the lessons of past initiatives aimed at ending deforestation: Halting forest loss will remain an illusion until action is undertaken to eliminate the underlying causes that drive deforestation.

(1) For more information on Deforestation, see bulletin 188 of the WRM, soon available at www.wrm.org.uy
(2) http://wrm.org.uy/blog/videos/forests-much-more-than-a-lot-of-trees/

Signatories (Social Organizations, Networks, Movements and Individuals)