
Congo, D.R.: Millions of acres of forest under unsustainable logging

Located in the heart of the African continent, the Democratic Republic of Congo's 2.3 million square kilometres territory covers most of the Congo River basin and has a narrow outlet into the Atlantic. The center and northern regions are covered with rainforests (1.1 million square kilometres in 1993) which, although sparsely populated, are the major livelihood for many of the country's 48 million people who depend on the forests for non-timber forest products such as food, building materials and medicines.

Though a country rich in natural resources, landlessness, competition for land and a long history of conflict have led a great proportion of its population to poverty, hunger, chronic malnutrition and indebtedness.

Logging companies operate without an institutional or legislative framework to ensure sustainable and equitable use. Most timber exports are of logs, though in April 1999 there was a brief ban which was lifted three months later on account of pressure from the forestry sector. The World Bank also contributed to increase timber exports with US\$ 12 million given for that purpose with the aim of paying the country's debt.

The extremely low yield of logging operations resulting from a highly selective cut where only the best trees are taken, just accelerates the pace at which rainforests are being opened up.

Since 1996, several Malaysian timber companies have been exploiting the forests of CDR: Idris Hydraulic Bhd. has timber concessions totalling three million acres in CDR and Gabon, and in 1997 Innovest Bhd. bought two timber concessions in CDR totalling nearly two million acres. The German company SIFORZAL has been granted a logging concession of more than six million acres. Additionally, China is promoting logging in CDR to supply its huge internal market.

Although there are several protected areas, the war has prevented management and monitoring of those within conflictive zones. But also those outside the war zone are not being properly monitored.

In social terms, on the one hand logging companies provide a certain level of health, education and transportation services to local people usually neglected by the State, but on the other hand, they pay very low wages and feel no responsibility for Congolese workers once they have finished logging and moved away. This means that those who have moved into the forest to work for the company often have to switch to clearing the forest to grow food in order to feed their families. They --and not the companies or the government-- are then blamed for destroying the forest, while those responsible for the social, economic and

environmental destruction triggered off by unsustainable logging cash their profits and leave. The victims thus become victims twice, while the forests continue to disappear.

