
Congo, D.R.: Will Zimbabwe become a member of the logging club?

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has nearly half of Africa's, and 6% of the world's, tropical rainforest and the area has been recently designated one of the most important forests on the planet by the United Nations.

Until recently, poor communications and the continuing conflict had largely spared much of the country from the attention of commercial tropical timber firms. But now a Zimbabwean company has gained rights to exploit 33 million hectares of forests in DRC, 15% of its total land area and ten times the size of Switzerland. Allegedly this has been the result of a deal between the DRC's government and representatives of Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe in return for military aid against rebels in the east of the country and in a desperate attempt to recoup some of the losses Zimbabwean leaders have incurred in their intervention in DRC.

The logging concession has been granted to Socebo, a subsidiary of Cosleg (Pvt) Ltd. Cosleg is itself a joint venture between the ironically named Operation Sovereign Legitimacy (Osleg), a company largely controlled by the Zimbabwean military, and Comiex-Congo, a firm largely owned by the family of DRC President Joseph Kabila. The operation is expected to bring in profits of up to US\$ 300 million over the two to three years it will take to clear the concessions of the most valuable timber.

The intention is to log four concessions, located in Katanga, Kasai, Bandundu and Bas-Congo Provinces, from each of which Socebo hopes to produce over 150,000 cubic metres of timber per year at full capacity. All the concessions were scheduled to be opened by 30th April 2001 but, as far as we are aware, the starting dates have not been met. The reason for this delay appears to be that the company has been unable to raise the necessary funds, estimated at approximately US\$30-40 million per concession --of which more than half would be borrowed from financial markets.

The timber would be exported --as Zimbabwe is self sufficient-- although some could be used for domestic consumption in DRC. At this stage it is not clear exactly where logs will be exported to, but it is likely that timber from the Katanga concession would be exported by rail through Zambia and eventually from Durban (South Africa) to countries outside the region. The other concessions are further north and, due to poor road conditions, it is likely the timber would be transported by river. Currently 80% of logs exported from DRC transit Congo-Brazzaville and are destined for the European market. Judging by regional trends France would almost certainly be a major importer (as it is from Cameroon, Gabon and Liberia).

Timber in DRC has been exploited for over 60 years by what has effectively become a cartel, which includes French, Belgian and some German interests. Unless a company is a member of this cartel, it is considered that operating timber concessions would be extremely difficult if not impossible. Will Zimbabwe become a new member of this destructive and exclusive "club"?

Article based on information from: "Zim loggers to ravage rainforest", Jason Burke, The Mail & Guardian, September 4, 2001; The World Guide 2001/2002; Global Witness, briefing document, 26th August 2001,

