
Liberia: Forest destruction backed by the government

Liberia hosts the last two significant blocks of the remaining closed canopy tropical rainforest within what is known as the upper Guinea Forests of West Africa, which spans Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone. The original extent of tropical rainforest in the upper Guinea forest is estimated at 727,900km², but has shrunk to about 92,797km², which represents only 12.7% of its original size. Liberian forests account for 44.5% of the remaining 92,797km² followed by Cote d'Ivoire with 29.1%. This region holds a rich biodiversity, with over 2000 species of plants of which 240 are valuable timber species (see WRM Bulletin 44).

In the case of Liberia, the deforestation process is the result of the greed of international logging companies that invaded the country in the last decade, coupled with the attitude of the Liberian government that promotes their activities. Almost every significant national forest land, including areas previously designated as national parks or forest reserves, has been granted as concessions to logging companies, while those yet not granted are being encroached upon by various other companies. Monitoring and regulation by the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) exist only on paper. Logging operations have reached an unprecedented proportion, with approximately 60% of the country's forests now severely degraded. The country's biodiversity and the livelihoods of rural communities are further threatened, because deforestation has effectively separated the northern/northwestern and eastern/southeastern portions of the rainforest.

In January 2000 the government announced it was cancelling all concession agreements and that only applications for concessions of more than 300,000 acres would be granted. While the FDA insisted that this new measure was aimed at maximizing national income and promoting the sustainable utilization of the forest, it is now apparent that the actual motive was to grant larger concessions to few foreign giant logging companies. This is proven by the fact that areas seized from smaller companies were immediately redistributed amongst giant companies.

Even though there is very little difference in the modus operandi of the logging companies, the case of Oriental Timber Company (OTC) is paradigmatic (see WRM Bulletin 30). In the 1990s, during the Liberian civil war, a Dutch businessman --Mr. Gus van Kouwenhaven, known in the official circles as "Gus" and closely connected to Charles Taylor, who would become President of the country-- succeeded in acquiring several concessions in southeastern Liberia, --a significant portion of the forest block stretching from Grand Bassa through River Cess and into Sinoe County. Even though the agreement was kept in secret, the concession's present size is estimated to range between 900,000 hectares and 1.44 million hectares. In 1999 a Malaysian company registered in Liberia as the Oriental Timber Company (OTC) and --surprisingly enough-- had "Gus" as its president. In addition to its logging operations, OTC manages the port of Buchanan and upgraded the road connecting the ports of Buchanan and Greenville, originally constructed by "Gus" during the Liberian war to transport logs.

The OTC agreement has been and still is subject of much speculation and criticism. Ownership of the OTC is yet somewhat uncertain, and while some believe that the Indonesian Djan Djanti Group is the OTC's parent company in Asia, others point at the Hong Kong-based Global Star Group.

No environmental impact assessment was ever carried out regarding its logging activities. Clearcutting is practised in vast areas using more than 140 assorted caterpillars/bulldozers and about 75 trailers which work seven days a week, day and night, each trailer making at least two daily trips to the port of Buchanan to deliver logs. Given the speed at which OTC operates, a realistic estimate of log extraction can be put within the range of 2500 – 3000m³ of logs/day, or 75,000m³ - 90,000m³/month. These practices are in flagrant violation of established FDA regulations.

All OTC production is exported as round logs. According to OTC Director Joseph Wong, the company exports some 60,000-70,000 m³ per month to southeast Asia to supply its plywood factories. This comes to 720,000-840,000 m³ per year. The excess production is sold in the port of Buchanan to buyers mostly for export to Europe --France and Spain being the most frequently cited.

As usually happens, the arrival of OTC to the region was trumpeted as something positive because it would result in the creation of thousands of new jobs and in the building of roads, hospitals and schools to assist rural dwellers. Nevertheless, residents of rural communities where OTC operates complain of numerous abuses, among which the destruction of houses, crops and sacred forests belonging to local communities. At the same time, local dwellers have in several instances been subjected to harassment, intimidation and even unlawful detention by officers of the OTC's militia. Some 600 Asian labourers (mostly from the Indonesian island of Sumatra) have been imported and were all given free work permits. All skilled jobs are operated by Asians with reportedly few going to Liberians. Only unskilled jobs at the port, or spotters and chainsaw operators in the forest are reserved for Liberians.

All the above proves that OTC and the Liberian government are close partners and this partnership is enhanced by the controversial Strategic Commodity Act, whereby the President can declare any of the country's natural resources --from forests to mines-- as a "strategic commodity". He has the sole power to execute, negotiate and conclude all commercial contracts or agreements with any foreign or domestic investors for the exploitation of any of those commodities. In one of the most high profile incidences, President Taylor dismissed Grand Bassa county's Superintendent when he criticized the OTC and threatened to arrest its top management for failing to respond to complaints against the company by locals. In another incident, the president granted the OTC permission to log 114,935 hectares of forest which had been designated to be used by the University of Liberia for scientific studies and research purposes only.

The result of this de facto "joint-venture" between the private and the public sector is apparent: it is OTC and a reduced group of officials who win, while Liberian forests and people continue to loose.

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