
The uncertain fate of forests in the Congo Democratic Republic

Rainforests in the centre and northern regions of Congo Democratic Republic (ex-Zaire) occupy more than half of the country's total area of 2,345,409 square kilometres and represent 82.5% of the original forest cover. About 47% of the whole dense tropical forests of Africa and 6% of the Planet's forests are in Congo DR. The long distances between the forests and commercial harbours, as well as the political crisis and the armed conflict between domestic groups and with neighbouring Rwanda and Burundi during the decade of 1990 caused that most of the country's forests remained untouched, which constitutes a difference with respect to other countries of the region. However, logging concessions are now threatening those forests.

SIFORZAL -subsidiary to the German Danzer Group- has been granted an area of 2.6 million hectares. Since 1996, several Malaysian timber companies are also exploiting vast areas: Idris Hydraulic Bhd. has got timber concessions totalling 1.25 million hectares in Congo DR and Gabon, while in 1997 Innovest Bhd announced it was buying two timber concessions for 707,000 hectares. Additionally, China is promoting logging in Congo DR to supply its huge internal market, which has increased its external demand due to an internal logging ban. Conserve at home and cut abroad seems to be the motto.

Even though being very rich in minerals and forests, Congo DR is among the poorest countries in the world according to its social indicators. The government has seemingly reacted to defend the vast area of remaining forests, and in April 1999 log exports were banned for three months. Foreign companies immediately claimed that this would be "the end of the forestry sector in the country" and soon logs were again being exported.

The question is if the government will submit to foreign interests -and give indiscriminate logging the green light- or if it will try to use forests sustainably and equitably for the benefit of present and future generations. Given the critical economic situation prevailing in the country, much will depend on support from all those governments which in international fora appear to be gravely concerned over the fate of the forests ... among which Germany, Malaysia and China, whose companies are now eager to begin the destruction of the forests of Congo.

Article based on information from: Greenpeace España, "Deforestación y Pobreza en Africa Tropical", Abril 2000; World Rainforest Movement and Forest Monitor, "High Stakes. The need to control transnational logging companies: a Malaysian case study", August 1998; The World Guide 1997/98.