
Liberia: civil war and transnational profit making

During the first years of the 1990s Liberia was the scenario of a civil war which left 150,000 fatal victims and one million people displaced or leaving the country as refugees. From January to November 1996 the war was triggered again until finally presidential elections took place in 1997. Governments of neighbouring countries, as well as European governments and companies -particularly Belgian and French- were involved in the delivery of weapons to the different groups engaged in the conflict, in exchange for gold, diamonds and roundwood.

France provided the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) with guns and received precious tropical roundwood in exchange. The government of Ivory Coast also helped the NPFL, and obtained the benefit of mining and forest concessions. The total value of illegal wood exports from the areas controlled by the different armed groups in conflict reached U\$S 53 million a year. During the Liberian civil war period, the import of tropical roundwood from Liberia in Spain increased considerably, and since 1997 the flux has restarted. Greenpeace-Spain has recently denounced that the country's consumption of Liberian tropical roundwood is promoting social and environmental destruction in that country.

War is now apparently over, but the usual vultures are ready to continue profiting in its aftermath. Transnational logging companies -such as LAMCO (USA-Sweden), Bridgestone (Japan), and Oriental Timber Company (Malaysia)- are targeting Liberia, where 35% of the rainforests still remain untouched (see WRM Bulletin 30). In spite of the government's declared intention of "minimizing forest destruction and promoting sustainable forest management", the economic and political power of foreign governments and companies, coupled with a national economy in shambles as a result of civil war, pose an important threat to their survival. And what needs to be stressed is that those same powerful governments, which appear as committed promoters of tropical forest conservation in international fora, are the ones which are most eager to profit from the destruction of Liberia's forests.

Article based on information from: Miguel A.Soto, Greenpeace Spain, April 2000; Liberian Forestry Development Authority, Annual Report 1999; The World Guide 1997/98.