
Made in Vietnam, cut in Cambodia

During this decade Vietnamese loggers have been illegally felling trees in Cambodia, especially in Ratanakiri Province, to obtain wood to be used in manufactured garden furniture exported to Europe. According to Vietnamese law, exclusively imported wood can be used to this aim, and this raw material comes from the neighbour countries, being Cambodia one of them (see WRM Bulletin 18).

Vietnamese loggers obtain cheap raw material and part of the money goes to fund Cambodia's "parallel" military budget, since members of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces are in charge of protecting illegal logging activities. While an accelerated process of deforestation and forest degradation takes place, local communities are negatively affected because logging damages farming and fishing. They are denied access to logging concessions which have taken over land and forests on which they have relied for their livelihoods for generations, and in some cases they are even intimidated or murdered. At the same time the treasury is losing about US\$ 180 million a year due to these illegal operations.

Under the motto "Made in Vietnam, cut in Cambodia" last March Friends of the Earth and Global Witness started a campaign in the UK to boycott the sale of Vietnamese garden furniture. The objective of this campaign, based on the follow up of the production chain of wood coming from Cambodian tropical forests is to provide public opinion with a holistic view of the problem and to raise awareness among Northern consumers.

The Government of Cambodia has recently begun to control this obscure business, which results not only in environmental destruction but also in losses in government revenues. Nevertheless the Government's move does not seem to address the core of the problem. In this regard, Global Witness has issued the following press statement:

"Since the February meeting of the Consultative Group, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has mounted several well publicised operations to crack down on illegal logging operations. Whilst this demonstration of political will represents probably the most prolonged and robust anti-logging measures yet taken by the RGC, and has undoubtedly resulted in a reduction in illegal logging activity, it is probable that the RGC are missing the prime targets.

There are disturbing reports that small sawmills operating for local use have been targeted and closed down by the RGC, resulting in a shortage of, for example, building materials and a corresponding increase in the price of timber. At the same time the major perpetrators of unsustainable and illegal logging, the military and the legal concessionaires, remain largely unaffected.

This state of affairs gives rise to the potential that the Cambodian public will see the logging crackdown as an infringement of their rights and livelihood, rather than as a serious effort to bring industrial scale operators under control for the benefit of the entire country and its population. Any resulting public opposition to forest policy reform will seriously undermine the reconstruction of Cambodia. The RGC needs to address this issue.

The military: The removal of various military leaders from their posts due to their involvement in illegal logging operations is welcomed, but Global Witness' intelligence indicates that military controlled logging operations are continuing in many areas including Bokor and Aural protected areas, Stung Treng, Koh Kong, Kompong Thom, Pursat and Kratie.

Legal concessions: Global Witness has frequently documented serious infringements of Cambodian legislation and forestry management regulations by virtually every forest concessionaire in Cambodia. The recent cancellation of concessions targeted inactive operators or areas already too degraded to be economically viable. The most serious perpetrators of bad forest management and illegal activities remain unaffected. It is imperative that all concession activity is suspended pending the results of the ADB concession review process, due to take place in mid 1999. The RGC has the legal right to terminate the concessions of those companies that have breached the terms of their concession contracts.

If the RGC continues to target small operations whilst ignoring the major perpetrators of illegal logging, the logging crackdown has no long term future and will be largely cosmetic, whilst at the same time causing financial and other hardships to the rural population. The implications for the preservation of Cambodia's forest resources are severe."

Sources: Sarah Tyack, Friends of the Earth, 26/3/99; Late Friday News, 33rd Edition, 27/3/99; Global Witness Press Statement, 24/3/99.