
Suriname: controversy about forest policy

On October 7 Suriname's Minister of Natural Resources and the Dutch Embassy to Suriname signed a contract worth US\$30 million for the Forestry Production Control Project, intended to monitor logging activities by using mobile inspection units. This is one component of a larger project that will support reconstruction of the Forest Service's infrastructure that was destroyed in the Civil War (1986-92) and the establishment of a Timber Institute to control logging and promote investment in the Forestry Sector.

According to the government, protected areas would be increased from 5% of Suriname's total area to 10%, using funds of the GEF. Both control over logging and increased protection of biodiversity were said to be part of Suriname's quest for sustainable development and larger responsibility to the world. What seems contradictory is that the government also stated that this operations are essential since Suriname intends to intensify logging activities in the near future.

What the Ministry did not say is that logging concessions have already been granted and operations have already begun therein. For instance Berjaya Bhd., a notorious Malaysian logging company, was granted an exploratory concession in August of this year. Berjaya has been working illegally in Suriname for the past year and a half through a front company called Suriname American Wood Industries. Even if the company's management plan requires official approval, roads have already been built inside its concession and reports have even stated that timber is being cut. This concession is directly adjacent to the Bronsberg Nature Reserve. Reports (unverified) have also been made that Berjaya is cutting inside the Nature Reserve.

At least two other large concessions have also been granted. One of them is on the South-east point of the Van Blomenstein reservoir, but to whom it has been granted remains unknown. The other is that given to a joint Surinamese-Chinese company, operating under the name of NV Tacoba. Such concession covers a large area beginning near the Bronsberg Nature Reserve and South to within 3 kilometres of the Maroon community of Pokigron.

Last but not least: Indonesian company Barito Pacific Timber Group -the largest plywood producer of the country, which enjoys close ties to the Indonesian government- was recently in Suriname to investigate the possibility of investing in oil palm production. Barito is needing to secure additional log supplies to maintain its plywood production operations at optimal levels.

Given the controversy and intense international pressure inspired by Suriname's plan to hand out 3-5 million hectares of rainforest to Berjaya, MUSA and Suri-Atlantic in 1995, it is understandable that the government is being very cautious about granting logging concessions. Increasing protected areas, provided Indigenous and Maroon rights are recognized and respected, and increasing the capacity of the Forest Service appear to be positive measures. Serious questions must be raised however about the sincerity of the Government's forest policy.

Source: Forest Peoples Programme. 1/11/97.

