



New report reveals Europe's role in funding war in the Central African Republic

Urgent action required to cut trade and aid ties to logging companies that have paid millions to militia guilty of mass murder and war crimes

Europe has played a significant role in funding the Central African Republic's (CAR) conflict, which has killed more than 5,000 people and displaced over a million, a new Global Witness report reveals.(1)

In 2013, the insurgent group Seleka seized power in CAR in a bloody coup d'état. Seleka rebels were dispatched to the country's rainforests to generate funds. Here they struck lucrative deals with three logging companies from France, Lebanon and China that helped bankroll a fierce campaign of violence against the country's population. Since the fall from power of Seleka in 2014 CAR's forests have fallen under the control of other armed groups, the Anti-Balaka. Routine payments by loggers to armed militia continue.

Global Witness' report, *Blood Timber: How Europe helped fund war in the Central African Republic*, details Europe's complicity on three counts:

- **Trade:** European companies are trading with CAR logging companies, which in 2013 alone paid over **3.4 million euros** to rebels so that they could continue logging illegally, at scale and for significant profit. (2) Global Witness identified two traders in particular that play a key role - Germany's Johann D. Voss (3) and French-registered Tropica-Bois.(4)
- **Illegal imports:** Europe is the premier destination for CAR wood, meaning EU member states are failing in their legal obligations to keep illicit timber off European markets. Official CAR figures suggest that 59% of the country's timber exports end up in Europe, with most going to Germany (32% of total exports), France (20%) and the UK (5%). (5)
- **Donor aid:** France has paid millions of euros in development aid to CAR's logging companies, based on the flawed assumption that CAR's logging industry contributes to local development. (6) The EU is also pursuing a timber trade agreement with CAR that further benefits its logging industry.

Global Witness is calling on EU member states to cut all trade and aid links to CAR's logging industry, which continues to be a source of instability as the African country struggles to restore peace.

"The Central African Republic's brutal conflict has been kept alive with the help of European money," said Alexandra Pardal, campaign leader at Global Witness. *"Our investigations have shown that logging companies that illegally export to Europe have paid millions of euros into the hands of rebels guilty of mass murder, kidnappings, rapes and the forced recruitment of child soldiers. These companies should be tried as accessories to war crimes."*

The logging companies under investigation – IFB from France, SEFCA from Lebanon, and Vicwood from China – preside over an area of CAR rainforest over two hundred times the size of Paris, and together account for 99% of timber exports from the country. (7) Global Witness investigations found that all three made frequent payments to Seleka – as bribes, to pass roadblocks, for armed escort, and for the protection of their logging sites, including a single transaction of nearly 381,000 euros by SEFCA to the Seleka government. (8) Given the size of these payments, any CAR timber traded from April 2013 to January 2014 should be classified as 'conflict timber', as it helped fund serious crimes under international law.

Seleka was ousted from power in 2014 and a transitional government installed, but armed gangs still partition the country, killing, looting and terrorising local populations. *Blood Timber* documents how logging companies' payments to Seleka's rivals, the Anti-Balaka, have helped the group maintain their presence in the country's forested south-west. Throughout the conflict, IFB, SEFCA and Vicwood have also systematically dodged taxes and broken laws on logging.

This lawlessness has done little to deter foreign trade. During the conflict, timber has overtaken diamonds as CAR's number one export and is streaming into Europe, in defiance of European legislation tailored to fight the illegal timber trade – the EU Timber Regulation. CAR's biggest trader, France's Tropica-Bois, registered record profits in 2013, up 247% from 2010. When interviewed by an undercover Global Witness operative, a Tropica-Bois representative expressed her indifference to war-time trading.

"It's Africa. [War] is so common we don't really pay attention...It's not a war where they attack white people. It's not a war we have to avoid," she said, unaware that she was being filmed.

The French Development Agency has meanwhile paid millions to CAR loggers, including 1.4 million euros to SEFCA, to develop a legally required 'forest management' plan that the company has failed to respect. Donors often point to the timber sector's role in CAR's economy – it currently boasts 2,717 jobs and is supposed to generate millions in taxes for the state. But as *Blood Timber* reveals, these benefits are far outweighed by the sector's role in fuelling corruption, illegality and conflict.

"The Central African Republic is still struggling to restore peace but for many European companies it has been business as usual," said Alexandra Pardal of Global Witness. *"It is tragically ironic that while European governments invested hundreds of millions of euros in military and peacekeeping operations in CAR, those same governments have failed to keep conflict timber off EU markets. Until Europe ends its support of CAR's logging industry EU consumers may be unwittingly fuelling a conflict that their own armies were sent to stop."*

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Notes to editors:

(1) The UN Commission of Enquiry "considers that such estimates fail to capture the full magnitude of the killings that have occurred."

(2) This includes an estimated EUR 1,200,000 in payments to pass militia roadblocks and EUR 1,770,000 in payments for "protection" services in 2013.

(3) It appears that the company ceased trading on 1 April 2015, according to the Hamburg Registry of Commerce, though under German law the company's Managing Director could still be liable for criminal prosecution. See Article 8 of the "Holzsicherungsgesetz, HolzSiG" law.

(4) French trader Tropica-Bois is half-owned by the owners of CAR's biggest logging company SEFCA.

(5) Source: Eurostat and statistics of the CAR Ministry of Forests, 2013. Belgium, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy and Portugal are also buyers. Asia accounts for 39% of total exports, most of which (32%) goes to China. CAR timber exports to China may be underestimated because European traders are also selling timber to China.

(6) <http://www.afd.fr/webdav/site/afd/shared/PUBLICATIONS/RECHERCHE/Evaluations/Evaluations-conjointes/Congo-forets-annexes-evaluation-conjointe.pdf>

(7) Vicwood group has four logging companies in CAR: VICA, Thanry Centrafrique, Sofokad and Sinfocam.

(8) This includes an estimated EUR 1,200,000 in payments to pass militia roadblocks and EUR 1,770,000 in payments for "protection" services in 2013.

SEFCA responded to Global Witness allegations with claims that its timber is legal and that it is a victim itself as it lost several vehicles in the upheavals. The company claims that it hosted the Seleka regime's forces as well as international peacekeepers on its facilities for security reasons only. Vicwood also claims that its timber is legal and that it only paid fees at normal government checkpoints. Johann D. Voss and Tropica-Bois deny that the timber they trade, harvested by SEFCA, is illegal.