

Power struggle and illegal logging threaten Sierra Leone's remaining forests

Whilst illegal loggers are threatening Sierra Leone's few remaining forests, including the Outamba-Kilimi National Park, a turf war is being waged between key government departments tasked with tackling such issues. Global Witness is calling on new President Ernest Bai Koroma to bring much needed direction and law enforcement to Sierra Leone's forest sector in order to prevent further destruction.

The previous President, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, shifted responsibility for environment and forestry from the Ministries of Lands and Agriculture, respectively, to the newly created National Commission of Environment and Forestry (NaCEF). Many believed this decision was taken because these two Ministries – and related governmental agencies – were ineffective in stopping widespread logging operations. Over the past few years there have been rumours of corruption within these Ministries (1). However, in a recent speech, Sierra Leone's new President Koroma linked environment and forestry with their old ministries, which have taken this as a cue to reclaim these portfolios, together with NaCEF's US\$6 million of international funding (2).

It is critical that an urgent decision on the future of NaCEF is made given the recent upsurge in illegal logging, much of which is reported to have been carried out by Chinese loggers. The situation has become so severe that earlier this month the government banned timber exports amidst fears that environmental degradation may force forest-dependent communities to move from their land. A coherent and effective government response is unlikely until this decision has been reached.

"The Appraisal Mission for a Global Environment Facility (GEF) project to improve biodiversity management on 5 Protected Areas (PAs), and raise two of these PAs to the level of National Parks has been postponed four times in the last couple of months because the World Bank says the current institutional arrangements do not make it clear who is the counterpart institution in-country. Other projects under negotiation are also being held in abeyance on similar grounds. We risk jeopardizing benefits intended for the country as a whole," said Chris Squire, Executive Commissioner, NaCEF. Global Witness tried to speak to Joseph Sesay, Minister of Agriculture, Forestry & Food Security but he was unavailable.

"It's good that the government of Sierra Leone has banned timber exports, but the critical thing is to stop the illegal logging taking place at all," said Patrick Alley Director of Global Witness (3). "On top of that, it is critical that President Koroma clarifies which arm of his government is responsible for forests and environment, and gets them to act quickly to bring the illegal logging under control."

Sierra Leone's environment has been devastated by years of war. Forest communities in the north-west, dependent on the forests for their livelihoods, complain that Chinese loggers are logging out valuable timber and destroying the

forests ecological services. Meanwhile, Freetown suffers water shortages because the forests that act as a water catchment are being felled for development.

“Sierra Leone has a mountain to climb in terms of reconstruction and undoubtedly lacks money and capacity; it is critical that the Government focuses its efforts on controlling illegal logging rather allowing different departments to scramble for power and funding,” said Patrick Alley.

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(1) Concord Times: “The Politics Of Selective Punishment”, July 1, 2002, Standard Times , “Taking the Bull By the Horn”, July 3, 2002 Standard Times, “Rogue Land Officials Fight Back, Bobson Sesay Accused of Fraud”, August 14, 2002 Standard Times, “No Alternative to Demolition”, August 14, 2002 Concord Times , “Surveyor On Trial for Selling State Land” , August 24, 2002 Standard Times, “ Something to think about”, June 26 2006, “Koroma’s Sierra Leone: Rising to a Generation of National Challenges”, Keday S. Kamara, October 10, 2007, <http://www.worldpress.org/Africa/2957.cfm>; Standard Times, “ Conspiracy! Corrupt Officials Exposed at Ministry of Lands, Housing and the Environment.” January 23 2008.

(2) From the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), The World Bank’s Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the United Nations Environment Programme.

(3) Global Witness exposes the corrupt exploitation of natural resources and international trade systems, to drive campaigns that end impunity, resource-linked conflict, and human rights and environmental abuses. Global Witness was co-nominated for the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize for its leading work on ‘conflict diamonds’ and awarded the Gleitsman Foundation prize for international activism in 2005. For more information on Liberia, see other Global Witness reports and briefing documents, available at www.globalwitness.org.