

African Countries Take Lead On Illegal Logging

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Of the 39 countries which recently signed a declaration outlawing illegal logging 31 came from Africa, an indication of how seriously the problem of illegal logging is viewed around the continent.

The declaration came at the Africa Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (AFLEG) conference held in Yaounde, Cameroon, last month, which was co-hosted by the Cameroonian government and World Bank, the UN Wire service reported.

The AFLEG conference followed from a similar initiative in East Asia, where there has also been major concern about the expansion in the illegal timber industry.

Environmental pressure groups have lobbied hard for stronger international campaigns against illegal logging, while urging that local organisations, like Liberia's Save my Future Foundation (SAMFU), are actively involved in consultations.

"With this declaration, participating countries are able to step up efforts at the national level and to strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation in handling offences and contraventions to forestry laws," Cameroon's Minister for Environment and Forestry (MINEF), Tanyi Mbianyor Clarkson Oben, told the meeting.

He said that strong legislation was indispensable if sustainable forest-management, fair profit-sharing and poverty alleviation were to be achieved.

According to research done by the Global Forest Watch Initiative, until recently half of the active logging licenses in Cameroon were awarded illegally.

Illegal logging on public lands worldwide is estimated to cause annual losses in revenues and assets in excess of US \$10 billion.

Some of the heaviest losses are in Africa. According to World Bank estimates, annual losses in Cameroon are around \$5.3 million, in Congo-Brazzaville \$4.2 million, in Gabon, \$10.1 million and in Ghana a catastrophic \$37.5 million per year.

"Forest law enforcement and governance are the foundation upon which all real forest conservation must rest," Deputy Assistant Secretary Jeffrey Burnam of the US Department of State told delegates.

Burnam outlined the responsibility of governments "to administer and enforce their forest and wildlife plans, to effectively manage parks and protected areas, and to ensure that forest concessionaires respect the law". He pointed out that under the Bush administration funding for the Tropical Forest Conservation Act had doubled and pledged US assistance on capacity building assistance, helping promote eco-tourism, park and forest management, landscape planning.

Burnam suggested the US could help on satellite technology, "enabling African nations to monitor forest trends, roads, and logging camps".

The European Union announced its Action Plan for Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade in October and has called on countries affected by illegal logging "to break the alliance between corruption and illegal behaviour which drives this dismal pattern".

The AFLEG declaration confirms, among other things, governmental commitment and will to eliminate illegal logging, associated illegal trade and corruption in the forest sector, including actions to monitor wildlife trade.

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It also confirms the need for shared responsibility and cooperation between stakeholders to address these issues, including action and partnerships from producer and consumer governmental programmes, donor programmes, civil society and the private sector.

"This AFLEG Declaration is a pact," World Bank Senior Advisor for Sustainable Development Odin Knudsen said.

"It is a pact between Africa and donors between governments and the people they govern, between sellers and buyers of timber products, between companies and their shareholders and their customers to do more in partnership," he said.

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More than 150 delegates, from Africa, North America, China and other regions attended the Yaounde meeting.

Forests cover more than one-quarter of the earth's land surface. They total 3.3 billion hectares, split about evenly between developing and industrialized countries, and are critical for the quality of the global environment. While deforestation is mainly concentrated in tropical regions, illegal timber operations in Russia, Canada and other countries have also been scrutinised by environmentalists.

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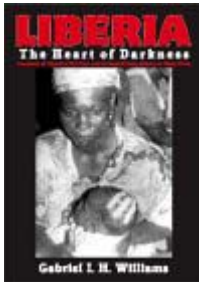
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