

Exposing illegal timber trade

Melvin Goh
Nov 10, 2003

Email this article
Printer friendly page



GOING NO WHERE... Some of the illegal logs that were confiscated by our authorities waiting to be auctioned off.

Just recently, the Security and Assets Protection Unit (SAPU) of the Sarawak Forestry Corporation seized 10 tons of sawn ramin wood with an estimated value of RM 40,000 at a border crossing point in Sarawak. Ramin is cited under the CITES (Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species) Appendix III protection and any trade of this species of timber must be accompanied by proper documentation from the relevant authorities of the host nation where the timber is sourced from.

"What all that means is that ramin can only be bought and sold with certification and the shipment that we confiscated at Lubok Antu on 30 October 2003 was without any proper CITES documentation," reveals Sani Bakar, SAPU General Manager. "This is just one example of illegal timber being smuggled into Sarawak and we are doing everything we can to stop it with assistance from other authorities.

As to allegations that huge amount of illegal timber is being shipped across the border, anyone who has been to the border check points will know that such cases are mere exaggerations. In fact, we are making sure that such illegal shipments are confiscated and furthermore, to bring the amount alleged would require heavy machineries and literally thousands of trucks just to carry them. The roads at the border crossings are not able to accommodate these huge amount of traffic and they cannot pass through our border check points without being noticed," he adds.





Continuous raids and seizures

The recent seizure of the load of ramin by SAPU is just one example of seizures of various species of timber in the past when the raids were conducted by STIDC (Sarawak Timber Industry Development Corporation), the Forest Department, Marine police and also the Kuching Port Authority to check illegal timber coming into our state.

confiscated... Processed illegal timber from overseas aboard a vessel that was intercepted by Sarawak authorities. Strict enforcement and regular checks are conducted to ensure that illegal timber will not find it easy to enter the state as that will affect the timber market locally and abroad.

In fact, more than 27 seizures have been recorded since 2000 to October this year at various border check points including Serikin, Muara Tebas, Kota Samarahan, Sematan, seas off Satang and Talang-

Talang islands, Tebakang near Serian, Tebedu and Jajoi Bambang. These raids are an indication of the seriousness of Sarawak to stamp out this illegal smuggling of ramin and other timber species into the state.

There is no doubt as to the seriousness of the government to stop the illegal shipment of timber into Sarawak which is detrimental to our own local timber producers and also detrimental to the conservation efforts especially if these illegal timber were sourced from national parks and sanctuaries across the border. Unless these illegal felling stop, there will always be cases whereby such illegal timber will find their way towards our common border.



Accusations and allegations

In a recent report by the Antara news agency, it was stated that the forestry minister of our neighbouring country called on wood consuming countries like

Japan, the European Union and United States to stop buying wood products from Malaysia, alleging that Malaysia had colluded with wood smugglers in illegal timber trade.



CAUGHT... Enforcement teams from Sarawak discovered this

Such allegations are purely to deflect the real issue of illegal felling of trees in their own areas which are beyond the jurisdiction and reach of outsiders. While stating that outsiders are colluding with the timber smugglers, it is clear that the authorities concerned there are aware of such activities being rampant in their areas and rightly should be taking steps to put a stop to such activities. By highlighting the issue instead of taking action at the source, it is clear that the authorities concerned only wanted to smear our name and reputation in the eyes of the international community.

Such public display of hypocrisy will only sour relations between the neighbours which in the long term will not solve the problem if illegal timber trade as only one partner is seen to take action to stop the flow at the border crossings. Also getting into the picture are international NGO agencies such as TELEPAK and EIA (Environmental Investigation Agency) that have reported on illegal timber coming into Sarawak.

These agencies based their claims on hard evidences such as pictures and videos showing illegal timber being shipped across the border, the same information which should rightly have been passed on to the authorities over there to nab the culprits in the act. It is actually quite puzzling as to why these agencies have all along known the existence of the illegal timber practices and yet never informed the authorities concerned of their whereabouts.



UNCOVERED... Illegal ramin timber being shipped via trucks across the border that was stopped by the SAPU team recently.

Furthermore the illegal activities also represent a loss of revenue to the country concerned if they failed to take the necessary steps to stop the illegal trade. Therefore it should be proper that these NGOs report directly to the authorities of any known illegal timber activities being conducted at the source and not after the illegal materials had reached Sarawak's side of the border.

By so doing, these NGOs are pointing to Sarawak as benefiting from the illegal

activity which in fact are causing us more problems of having to stop the entry of illegal timber and wasting invaluable amount of money on manpower and machinery as well as tying up court time when these resources could be better put for conservation purposes.

Forestry main revenue earner for Sarawak

Revenue from forestry industries is still Sarawak's main source of revenue while oil and gas are our top foreign exchange earners. Hence the recent call by our neighboring forestry minister for European, American and Japanese to stop buying wood products from Sarawak/Malaysia can be quite damaging to our forestry industries and our economy as well.

Making such uncalled for plan of action is certainly not in the interest and spirit of Asean especially when the problem lies almost exclusively on their side of the border stopping these illegal timber from being felled and moved to the border points of Sarawak should be their top priority. Any information on illegal timber coming across to Sarawak can easily be dealt with as long as the information is shared with us to nab the smugglers at the check points.

All these accusations are counter productive as they damage the credibility of tropical timber producing countries like Malaysia which only lead to more wild allegations and calls for more stringent actions against tropical timber trade, giving more ammunition for NGOs and western media to put more pressure on their governments to impose more conditions on our exports. By focusing more on joint co-operations, much more could be done for the good of both nations and this can also provide the ideal platform to raise pertinent issues relating to timber trade in the world.

As a single voice and firm in taking stance of allegations from western media and also NGOs, both nations can directly benefit from the effort to give a realistic picture of the situation at hand. As it stands now, the problems can best be handled at the ministerial levels, involving bilateral talks and discussions for the benefit of both nations and also for the spirit of Asean.