

Half of Dutch timber imports 'illegal'

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AMSTERDAM — The Netherlands imports a large quantity of illegal wood every year and large scale improvements can be made in relation to imports from tropical countries, the Dutch timber trade association VVNH has said.

The confession comes in the midst of a Greenpeace protest campaign against illegal hardwood, claiming that about 50 percent of the annual Dutch import of several hundred thousands tons of hardwood is illegally felled.

But VVNH director Andre de Boer said importers do not often know that they are bringing illegal wood into the country and the industry association is keen to make clear and concise agreements in future with tropical countries such as Brazil and Indonesia.

A code of conduct for importers will come into force from 1 January 2004. The code is designed to combat the shipment of illegal wood and about 250 of the 280 VVNH members have signed the new code, Radio Netherlands reported on Monday.

Meanwhile, a group of 13 Greenpeace activists chained themselves to a cargo ship docked in Amsterdam on Friday to protest against its alleged illegal load of Cameroon timber. The activists threatened to remain until the unloading of the ship was banned. They also demanded that customs investigate the ship's cargo.

Greenpeace later mentioned on its website that the environment lobby group had won permission from authorities to inspect the wood, being transported on the ship NDS Prominence. The activists unchained themselves and the timber was unloaded. The wood temporarily remains under Greenpeace watch.

Friday's protest action came after environmentalists used canoes and life rafts on Thursday 20 November to block shipping for six hours at IJmuiden — located at the mouth of the Noordzeekanaal which links Amsterdam to the North Sea.

Greenpeace was protesting against the arrival of the NDS Prominence, claiming it is transporting illegal wood from Cameroon. The lobby group claims illegal wood cutters are rapidly felling the Central African nation's rain forest.

It claims that companies illegally fell trees in regions of Cameroon where it is not permitted, and cut too many trees or protected species. The habitat of threatened chimpanzees and forest elephants is thus being reduced as one of the world last large rainforest areas disappears, it said.

The lobby group also said it found timber on the NDS Prominence from the Cameroon-based company EFH, which deals in wood from timber company COFA. The latter was recently fined by the Cameroon government for illegal timber clearing and the trade in illegal wood.

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