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Headlines

In Congo, Pygmies ill-prepared to fight for their forests

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Associated Press via Environmental News Network | Anjan Sundaram | March 1, 2006

Pygmy chief Mbomba Bokenu says he may soon let loggers cut his people's forests, and all he expects in return are soap and a few bags of salt.

"The Pygmies are suffering, we accept what we are given," said Bokenu, draped in brown civet-cat skins and holding a slender carved-wooden shield. "Our children live in dirt, they suffer from disease. Soap and salt is a lot to our people."

The Pygmies, though, should expect -- and demand -- much more under proposed rules meant to ensure forest communities benefit from the wealth all around them. But there's reason to question whether poor, illiterate Pygmies, product of years of government neglect and discrimination by ethnic Bantus, will be able to use the law to help themselves.

"People who do not have money for clothes are not in a position to apply the forestry code in a reasonable manner," said Richard Mboyo, head anthropologist at Congo's Center for Ecology and Forestry, a government research institution in the northwestern Equator province.

"Some of the tribes are facing the modern world for the first time. They don't understand the value of their trees," said Mboyo, who has researched forest communities in Congo for over two decades.

A 1998-2002 war left Congo's economy in shambles, but with peace largely restored and democracy on the horizon, private businesses have returned, lured by a vast forest still largely intact. Congo has 128 million hectares (some 300 million acres) of precious woodland -- the world's second largest rain forest, half of Africa's total.

Pygmy chief Bokenu said he knew some Bantus, who are more educated and Westernized, had negotiated hospitals for their forests. But when asked if the Pygmies would ask for one as well, he said: "We are not educated enough to ask for hospitals and schools."

Mboyo believed it would take years of diligent work to teach Pygmies their rights and how to use the law. And that effort could only begin once Congo's ruined infrastructure is rebuilt and the thick forests penetrated.

If Pygmies sign away their rights for soap and salt, the government may not be able to protect them, even if it wants to. Past governments have shown little inclination to help the Pygmies.

Under current laws, applicable until the new code is operative, companies -- so far largely Congolese -- buy logging permits from the faraway capital, Kinshasa, and uninformed locals are left out of the loop. In the past, the government funneled little of the logging permit revenue to the forest communities. Much of Congo's wealth was stolen or squandered by its leaders.

The new code, to be enforced by the government and expected to take effect this year, calls for 15 percent of government revenues from logging to be returned to communities adversely affected by the industry. The World Bank-supported code also requires timber

companies to negotiate with locals before they start logging.

Loggers oppose the new code, claiming it puts on them a burden that should be shouldered by a corrupt and callous government.

"One cannot expect companies to make schools and roads for the people. That is the government's domain," said Florentin Kage, president of Congo's logging industry lobby. "Our government doesn't work for the people. Now it wants us to."

There are other reasons for loggers to protest.

The new code gives government officials the power to revoke logging concessions at any time, leaving businesses at their continual mercy.

In the past, a large one-time payment to officials was sufficient to obtain a multiyear concession. Under the new law, loggers will have to constantly grease politicians' palms, even after committing heavy machinery and large investments to the forests.

Proponents of the code insist the government will protect poor people and is making amends for years of misuse of Congo's wood.

President Joseph Kabila ordered all forest concessions to be renewed in October 2005, a measure Environment Ministry officials claim is an attempt to weed out illegal dealings that led to large swaths of forest handed out to fraudulent businesses.

"The people will now have authority over their forests. If they say, 'We don't want logging,' it will be respected," senior Environment Ministry official Joseph Sudi told The Associated Press.

Sudi, though, also hinted at other pressures on the government, saying, "Congo needs its forests to start paying up." He said international donors and Congo's government are eyeing the Central African nation's timber to pay off over billions in foreign debt, accumulated mostly over three decades of dictatorial rule and a decade of war.

An initiative to protect the forests was launched in 2002 when the Congo Basin Forest Partnership was created at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in South Africa.

U.S. President George W. Bush's administration is helping to fund that partnership, a move some say is aimed at countering criticism for his refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol on global warming in 2001.

The heaviest polluter in the world could earn "carbon credits" for conservation work in Congo without having to cut emissions back home.

Sudi said Congo was negotiating measures to earn carbon credits itself: "If we choose to conserve the world's forests, we should be paid for it."

Meanwhile, a long way from the international debate, Congo's Pygmies are preparing to relinquish centuries-old sacred forests preserved by their ancestors.

"I will tell the spirit of the forest that his trees must be cut down," said Bokenu, the chief. "It is so his people can survive."

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