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The Last Mahogany Rush: Laundering illegal timber in Honduras destroys forests and jeopardises local community development

Poor governance in forest management in Honduras is threatening Río Plátano, the country's largest protected area and a UNESCO-accredited Man and the Biosphere Reserve, and jeopardising the livelihoods of local communities.

The report "*Illegal logging in the Río Plátano Biosphere: a farce in three acts*", published today by Global Witness, describes how, between 2006 and 2007, large-scale illegal logging was promoted by the authorities.

In his inauguration speech in January 2006, President Zelaya committed to eradicating illegal logging. However, just a few months later, AFE-COHDEFOR, the Honduran forest authority at the time, implemented a policy that not only failed to achieve this, but actually fostered illegal logging.

According to a number of informed sources, including forestry officials, the Deputy General Manager of AFE-COHDEFOR and current Deputy General of the new Honduran forest authority, Santos Cruz, played a key role in setting up the mechanisms that enabled the legalisation of so-called 'abandoned timber', which fuelled illegal logging in Río Plátano. As a result, as much as 8,000m³ were illegally felled, and up to US\$1 million of public funds were indirectly delivered to well-known illegal timber traffickers. It remains unknown how much of this wood eventually entered the American and European markets.

Local forest cooperatives suffered considerably. Illegal logging of mahogany decreased the value of their forests and jeopardised the development of viable community forestry initiatives. The cooperative system is a progressive social forestry concept, at least on paper, but cooperatives have often been infiltrated and abused by local timber barons. In this case, some were misused to launder illegal timber and suffered damage to their credibility.

'This case is a vivid illustration of how poor governance and impunity continue to prevail in Honduras. It is disappointing that President Zelaya's much publicised commitment to eradicate illegal logging has not been translated into reality. He should use his final year in office to tackle the drivers of illegal logging in Honduras' said Laura Furones, from Global Witness. 'The recent Forest Law, which establishes a new forest authority, is a golden opportunity to set up participatory processes and bring transparency to the management of Honduras' forests. Ending political patronage and systemic corruption must be a priority', said Furones.

With forests now centre stage in climate change negotiations, the need to put an end to illegal logging and associated deforestation and degradation is more pressing than ever. Good governance in Honduras and elsewhere is an essential prerequisite for the protection and sustainable use of forests. This, coupled with addressing the various drivers of deforestation and empowering forest dependent communities in sustainable forest resources use, should be the focus of any forest and climate strategy.

The full report can be downloaded at www.globalwitness.org.

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