

World Bank Oversees Carve-Up of Congo Rainforests

By [Global Research](#)

Global Research, February 13, 2004

Rain forest foundation 17 June 2005

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

World Bank oversees the carve-up of Congo's rainforests: 60-fold increase in logging planned

Environment, development and human rights groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) today called on the World Bank to halt or change projects that will lead to the parcelling-out of tens of millions of hectares of Congo's rainforest to logging companies [1].

In a statement issued today [2], more than 100 groups said that plans for the 'development' of DRC's forests would have "major repercussions for the rights and livelihoods of millions of Congolese citizens, with serious and irreversible impacts" on the forest environment.

The World Bank, together with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), is supporting the development of comprehensive new forestry laws in the Congo, as well as the 'zoning' of the country's entire forest area [3].

Internal World Bank documents obtained by the Rainforest Foundation reveal that the Bank is aiming to 'create a favourable climate for industrial logging' in the Congo, and envisages a 60-fold increase in the country's timber production [4]. In a letter to Hilary Benn, Secretary of State for International Development, the Rainforest Foundation has asked the UK Government to intervene to halt the Bank's plans.

Joseph Bobia, spokesperson for the Congolese development organisation, CENADEP [5], said:

"The World Bank and the FAO are supposedly committed to involving the public in major new projects, especially those that affect the laws and policies of poor countries. However, in the Congo, there has been no meaningful consultation with civil society over the proposed new forestry laws, or the re-zoning of land, that will potentially see much of the country turned into a vast logging concession."

Simon Counsell, for the Rainforest Foundation UK [6], said:

"The World Bank must strictly apply its own environmental and social safeguards, and fully respect international laws, in order to avoid unleashing a wave of destruction on Congo's forests. The rights and needs of people living in, and depending on, the forest should not be sacrificed in pursuit of spurious economic benefits from the logging industry."

A 4-page background briefing to this story is available on request, or for download from the Rainforest Foundation's website, www.rainforestfoundationuk.org

For further information:

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Notes to editors:

[1] Covering around 1.3 million square kilometres, the rainforests of the Democratic Republic of Congo are the largest in the world after Amazonia, and have so far largely been spared extensive destruction. An estimated 35 million people live in and around these forests, including Bantu farmers, and Twa and Mbuti hunter-gatherer 'Pygmies'.

[2] Available on request.

[3] The World Bank was closely involved with the development and adoption of a new Forest Code in DRC in August 2002. Along with the FAO, the Bank is supporting the development of a series of new laws that will implement this Code. Both agencies are also involved in preparing a national forest zoning plan, which will serve to define areas for logging, conservation and community use.

[4] World Bank/Democratic Republic of Congo, Forestry Sector Mission reports, 2002-2003. Copies of these documents can be made available to bona fide journalists.

[5] CENADEP is the National Centre for Development and Popular Participation (Centre National d'Appui au Développement et à la Participation Populaire), and is based in Kinshasa. CENADEP's activities span DRC, and aim to popular involvement in reconstruction and development of the country.

[6] The Rainforest Foundation is an international non-governmental organisation that aims to support indigenous people and traditional populations of the world's rainforests in their efforts to protect their environment and fulfil their rights. The Foundation supports more than 30 practical projects worldwide, including several in DRC.

The Foundation sent a detailed letter to the World Bank on December 2nd, 2003, requesting clarification on, and raising concerns about, the Bank's involvement in forestry in DRC, but has yet to receive a substantive response.

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