

Synopsis:

DEFORESTATION IN CAMBODIA: A bloody trail paved with dollars

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The 2012 murder of the militant ecologist Chut Vuty, who brought the on-going deforestation to light, will go unpunished. It seems difficult to solve the equation between economic progress and sustainable development: the government and major industries are to blame. On the ground, however, the trees are still being felled.

“Our forests have been destroyed over the past four years. We were moved here under pressure from the authorities”, confides Reth in his modest wooden home in the village of Busra, Mondolkiri province. All around, scorched hillsides and bulldozed lands stretch into the distance.

The country has lost a quarter of its forests in thirty years. In the northeastern provinces, the dusty track that once crossed the jungle has given way to a stretch of black asphalt that works its way across a no-man's land of bared earth. The land is cleared, and the forest is cut down to be replaced by hevea trees for rubber production. Applications are numerous, principally for vehicle tyres. Increasing demand in neighbouring countries, notably China, provides perspectives for long term and substantial profit. The precious latex oozes from the hevea trees for sixty years...it is a lucrative business.

Not surprising then that foreign investors come running. In the past ten years, the price of latex has been multiplied by a factor of seven! In Busra, Socfin KFD, a Luxembourg-based subsidiary of the French Bolloré Group has acquired 15000 hectares of forest destined for rubber production. The operation of the 30-year concessions is based on the principle of a « joint-venture » between a foreign company and a local Cambodian one. After investigation, the British NGO Global Witness has denounced collusion between local companies and those close to the government. Corruption is systemic in Cambodia ⁽¹⁾.

The worldwide chain of business dealings, from the producer to the customer is far from transparent. An EIA report dated April 2011⁽⁴⁾, ordered by the European Union, asserts that the armies of neighbouring countries are involved in illegal trading of wood. Worldwide, the equivalent of a football pitch is felled every two seconds.

When questioned on its supplies of raw material coming from South-East Asia, Pirelli stated that they did « not have enough elements to reply at this time ». The Korean tyre maker Hankook, like Michelin, did not reply ⁽³⁾. The latter has five factories in China and is currently building there the biggest tyre factory in the world.

« Up to three years ago we hunted game from the forest over there », murmured Reth, pointing to a grey and bare hillock. He is an ethnic Bunuong, an animist people that is in the majority in this province. Traditionally, families lived from hunting, fishing and gathering fruit: they were self-sufficient and the forest was sacred, being the home of the spirits that they worshipped. Nowadays, expropriations and forced displacement of populations are the rule. And poverty is on the increase. Cambodia is one of the poorest countries in the world, with 70% of its population living on less than 1,25USD per day ⁽²⁾.

Large-scale deforestation has made the future uncertain for the Bunuong people. In the distance, a column of ash rises into the sky. The forest is burning.

1 - The NGO Transparency International has ranked Cambodia 158th out of 174 countries studied in its 2012 Country corruption index.

2 - Source United Nations, 2013.

3 - Source : <http://www.novethic.fr>

4 - Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA). www.eia-international.org