

## TIMBER

# Guns, bribes and chainsaws

The lumber trade in the DRC's Nord-Kivu Province is plagued by rebel kidnappings, while meddling soldiers and government officials add to the disorder

**A**t a busy outdoor lot near the centre of Goma, the ground is covered with sawdust. Planks of wood are stacked in haphazardly placed piles. The space is messy, informal and frenetic, but every businessman there knows his way around the muddy paths, the stacks of timber, the tiny wooden sheds. Across this bustling town, there are plenty of smaller shops selling wood. They get their wares here, at this hub for timber exploiters in the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) eastern Nord-Kivu region.

A light drizzle turns to heavy rain, sending everyone scrambling for cover amid the sweet smell of dusty planks. E.B.\*, 47, settles into his own shed on the edge of the lot and sighs about the sorry state of the timber industry. "I've been working with wood since 2002, and business used to be good," he says. "Today, it's not. Why? Because when you go to bring your timber in from the forest, you're going to face lots of harassment."

## INFORMAL CONCESSIONS

Though forests cover two-thirds of the DRC's land, timber contributes relatively little to the country's gross domestic product (GDP). The true value of timber exploitation is unknown, partly due to the informality of granting concessions – an informality that persists despite 14 years of efforts to regulate the industry – and partly due to a general lack of reliable data. A 2011 report from the Center for International Forestry Research

estimated that the forestry sector contributed just 1% to the DRC's GDP in 2007, in contrast to much smaller countries like the Republic of Congo, Cameroon and Gabon, where timber exports accounted for 5.6%, 6% and 4% of GDP, respectively. A more recent report from London-based campaign group Global Witness found that in 2014 total wood exports – more than half of which went to China – amounted to 112,675tn, with a value of \$195m.

Across the country, non-governmental organisations and activists accuse large foreign companies that operate massive concessions – and the government officials who work with them – of flagrant profiteering. Today, the companies with the largest concessions include: Cotrefor, a Lebanese-owned company; Siforco, whose parent company, the Blattner Group, is



based in the DRC but is presided over by an American citizen; and Sodefor, also based in the DRC but run by a Portuguese family.

In Nord-Kivu, concessions tend to be small. Bursting as they are with biodiversity, these forests could be places where the DRC's abundant resources are put to good use. Instead, the

## Top 10 DRC timber importers

Tonnes of timber imported from the DRC between January 2013 and December 2015





IMADS NISSENPANOS-FREA

double threat of instability and corruption continues to choke businesses – and with it, hopes for peace and stability. Militant groups in Nord-Kivu are part of the problem, but so too are the corrupt dealings of government bureaucrats and army officials.

E.B. operates a 100ha concession in Walikale territory, about a two-day drive from Goma. His workers, numbering up to ten at a time, fell trees like eucalyptus and white nongo, which he retrieves in a truck and then sells to buyers in Goma. He is unsure of his profit margins because he lives hand to mouth, always working to keep his children schooled and fed.

#### TAXED AND TAXED AGAIN

“When you take wood from the bush, you’ll hit a road crossing and there might be rebels and they’ll charge \$5 to pass. You don’t have any choice,” E.B. explains. “Then you reach a place under government control. They charge, too. Sometimes they give you a receipt so that when you arrive home you can show offi-

cial that you’ve paid the tax. But they’ll still make you pay again.”

When it comes to natural resources, the DRC is well known for its mineral wealth – and for the corruption and violence that plague extraction operations. Walikale territory, where E.B.’s timber concession is located, is also rich in gold and tin, which have attracted the attention of several armed groups.

The militias perpetrating violence over the years have included the *Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple*, the *Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda* (FDLR), and smaller, community-based groups. Murky connections to army officials seem to have allowed these militants to commit atrocities – including one 2010 attack that resulted in the rape of at least 179 women – without much fear of capture.

Today, the most talked-about militant group in Nord-Kivu is the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an Islamist outfit with Ugandan roots. Army and government officials say the ADF is responsible

for several attacks over the past few years, calling the group a terrorist organisation with links to Islamist groups around the world.

In January 2014, the national armed forces, the *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC), launched the Sukola I operation to fight against the ADF militants. General Marcel Mbangi, who leads the operation, estimates that the ADF now has fewer than 200 members. But, he added, their guerrilla tactics make them difficult enemies. “The ADF is acting on the soil of the DRC, but it must have links outside,” says General Mbangi. “So it needs the cooperation of everyone – all of the international community – to try and eradicate it.”

#### EXAGGERATED REPORTS

Some accuse the government of overstating the ADF’s reach for political reasons. Insecurity, after all, has often served as a distraction from the governance issues that trouble this vast country. Several government critics and political analysts suggest that other groups – including the FDLR, local Mai-Mai fighters and even individuals settling personal scores – have been behind acts of violence that were blamed on ADF.

Even the army has been implicated in foul play. In October 2015, a report from the United Nations Group of Experts – which focused primarily on militants’ activities – devoted a section to the corrupt practices of the FARDC. “During multiple missions in May, June and July 2015, the Group found that FARDC officers deployed for the Sukola I military operations against ADF were involved in the exploitation and sale of timber in Beni territory,” notes the report, referring to an area north of Goma.

It adds that at a market on the border with Uganda, multiple buyers said they had purchased the wood directly from FARDC officers. Some soldiers reported that they had been given the option to harvest timber instead of going to battle.

**The softer and poorer quality timber is sold locally, while the best the DRC’s vast forests can yield is shipped off to China and other importers**