

Vietnam destroying Lao forests

By DENIS D. GRAY

BANGKOK, Thailand

Vietnam is acquiring huge quantities of illegally logged timber from neighboring Laos and turning it into furniture for consumers in the United States and Europe, an environmental group said Wednesday.

"Vietnam's booming economy and demand for cheap furniture in the West is driving rapid deforestation" in Laos, Julian Newman of the Britain-based Environmental Investigation Agency said at a news conference.

The group showed a video of fleets of trucks laden with logs crossing the border into Vietnam from Laos, which has banned the export of logs and sawn timber.

Every year, an estimated 17.6 million cubic feet of logs are smuggled across the border after false documents are produced and bribes paid, the group said.

The video included Vietnamese businessmen admitting that logs at their factories came from Laos in violation of the country's laws and were processed into furniture for export.

A huge pile of logs from Laos was shown in the Vietnamese port of Vinh, ready for sale.

Newman said businesses in Thailand are also buying illegally cut timber from Laos, which has some of the last great forests in mainland Southeast Asia.

"The cost of such unfettered greed is borne by poor rural communities in Laos who are dependent on the forests for their traditional livelihoods," Newman said.

Vietnamese and Thai officials were not immediately available for comment. The governments of both countries have in the past acknowledged the illegal trafficking of timber from Laos, although the scope of the trade has not previously been clear.

"The ultimate responsibility for this dire state of affairs rests with the consumer markets which import wood products made from stolen timber," Newman said.

Faith Doherty, another EIA staffer, said draft laws now before the U.S. Congress would curb such imports. She said the European Union was taking steps to certify furniture and other forest products as having come from legally procured timber.

An EIA report also released Wednesday noted that Vietnam has taken steps since the 1990s to conserve its own forests while at the same time expanding wooden furniture production, much of it with illegal timber.

Furniture exports from Vietnam totaled \$2.4 billion last year, a tenfold increase since 2000. According to the Vietnamese government, 39 percent of the exports in 2006 went to the United States, 14 percent to Japan, 7 percent to Britain and 4 percent each to France and Germany.

"The plundering of Laos' forests involves high-level corruption and bribery and it is not just Vietnam which is exploiting its neighbor. Thai and Singapore traders are also cashing in," the report said.

Posing as investors, EIA staffers met one Thai businessman who bragged of paying bribes to senior Lao military officials to secure timber potentially worth \$500 million, the group said.

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