



Forest Conflict in Asia: Undermining Development and Security



Why Is Forest Conflict Important?

INCIDENTS OF VIOLENT CONFLICT OVER FOREST resources and forestland are widespread in the developing countries of Asia and are reported in the news media daily. Forest conflict undermines attempts to improve governance, retards economic development, impoverishes rural people, and impairs key environmental functions.

Governments and rebel groups in several Asian countries have used tropical timber to bankroll armed conflict, while low-level conflict over forests occurs in most of the tropical developing countries of the region. In many of these countries, politicians and security forces harvest timber to get cash to buy political support and fund operations, often using intimidation and violence to overcome resistance from communities that depend on forests for their livelihoods. Unable to protect their forests, these already poor people become further impoverished when they lose access to resources and land.

Politicians and security officials who put their own interests above the welfare of their fellow citizens undermine the legitimacy of the state, create animosity that fuels more violence, and destroy a renewable resource for economic development, all of which contribute to state fragility. Disregard for the rule of law and the human rights of forest communities by government officials creates an atmosphere in which forests and land become open access resources, encouraging behavior that results in conflict.

Small-scale illegal loggers take advantage of the chaotic environment created by conflict logging, clashing with local communities, law enforcement officials, and each other. Logging roads leave forests vulnerable to poor farmers seeking small plots of land as well as powerful people seeking to illegally “grab” large tracts of forestland. Land grabbing by either group causes serious conflict with established communities that have lost their forests and will fight to retain their land.

Forest conflict and forest degradation are two sides of the same coin and lead to broader economic, social, and environmental impacts: governments do not capture revenues from conflict timber; the economic welfare and social structure of forest communities are weakened; and the productivity of forests is reduced. The food security of farmers is threatened when forest degradation changes river flow patterns and increases sediment levels, reducing the productivity of irrigated rice fields.



Degraded tropical forests are at increased risk for catastrophic fires that result in conversion to grasslands with very limited agricultural or environmental value. The poor logging practices that characterize illegal logging greatly diminish the biodiversity value of forests, which is further reduced when logging crews and security forces poach wildlife and fish.

What Causes Forest Conflict?

FOREST CONFLICT RESULTS FROM POOR GOVERNANCE, specifically the lack of accountability and corruption of government and military officials and the failure to establish and enforce laws that grant access to forest resources and forestland in a way that is transparent and seen as legitimate by all stakeholders. Most developing countries in Asia have failed to equitably allocate and sustainably manage their forests, leading to steep declines in the quantity and quality of this valuable resource. Expanding road networks, increasing populations, and exposure to global trade networks have made Asia’s forests vulnerable and more attractive to those wishing to liquidate them for their own ends. The decline of forests, coupled with greater demand for forest products in growing economies, is driving a rush to claim remaining timber, and after that, the land itself. The Indonesian island of Sumatra illustrates this process (see box on page 2).

Military forces in many countries of the region are forced to be partially or entirely self-funding, adding a deadly dimension to forest conflict. In Indonesia, military units are expected to raise about two-thirds of their operating budgets, which they typically do through logging and other illegal activities. In Cambodia in the early 1990s, both the Khmer Rouges and the govern-



Sumatra's forests have been under relentless pressure over the past decade as huge quantities of wood of all species and sizes is harvested to feed pulp mills, with remnant forests cleared to plant oil

palm. This sequence of events, facilitated by government officials, security forces, and sometimes community leaders, has caused widespread violent confrontations with forest communities. As forest resources become scarce and increasingly valuable, powerful people grab them and prevent the traditional owners from sharing benefits, prompting resistance. This situation worsened when forest management authority was moved from the central to the local level of government in 1999. Necessary laws, technical skills, and political accountability were not in place, causing even greater conflict among powerful local groups and with communities.

ment forces financed their military campaigns and political activities through timber sales. This tradition has continued as Cambodian field units are expected to “live off the land.” In Burma, both rebel groups and government forces harvest timber to fund military operations. Easy access to wood-hungry markets in Thailand and Vietnam make it easy to sell conflict timber from Burma, Cambodia, and the Lao PDR, while much of Indonesia's conflict timber is processed domestically or enters legitimate export channels.

How Can Forest Conflict Be Reduced and Managed?

CONTROLLING FOREST CONFLICT IS A KEY ASPECT OF THE larger goal of sustainably managing forests to contribute to state revenues, poverty alleviation, and environmental services for the long term. Growing populations, economic development, and changing patterns of demand for forest resources and land inevitably lead to conflict in the forests of developing countries. Governments should manage their forests and the conflicts over them in ways that are equitable and make economic and environmental sense. Responses to conflict must be developed on a case-by-case basis within an effective and legitimate governance framework.

The key elements of a conflict management framework are:

- Laws and institutions designed to allocate forest resources and forestland rationally and equitably to promote development, uphold the rights of forest dwellers, and protect the environment.
- A system of participatory land-use planning and forest zoning through which explicit tradeoffs can be made among competing uses.

- A means to legally assign control over forest resources and forestland through recognition of traditional ownership systems, community forest management agreements, land title to individuals and communities, or commercial concessions.
- A transparent means to enforce allocation decisions and hold all stakeholders accountable, including politically powerful people and the military.
- A means to mediate conflicts informally or through the judicial system. Judges must be impartial and trained to adjudicate natural resource conflicts.

Other important steps to avoid and reduce forest conflict include:

- Use media campaigns and direct pressure to encourage downstream industries and consumers to reject conflict timber and forest products.
- Empower forest people to understand and demand their rights to forest resources and land. This is facilitated if procedures are simple and legal recourse is accessible to poor people.
- Develop behavior change communication programs directed at people involved in forest conflict and who are responsible to reduce or eliminate it.
- Encourage civil society groups to use political means to advocate for sustainable forest management and the rights of forest communities.
- Discourage self-financing by military and police forces.
- Create alternative livelihood options for encroachers.
- Work with intermediaries in timber export markets and the governments of neighboring countries to control access to international market channels.

(NB: ARD is assessing forest conflict in Asia and developing approaches to manage it under contract to the USAID Asia and Near East Bureau. Reports produced under these task orders can be found at <http://www.ard-biofor.com/asiacconflict.htm>.)

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