

1. GLOBAL

FORESTS AND ARMED CONFLICT

By David Kaimowitz

War is a topic that is on many people's minds these days; and rightly so. Not only do wars kill and maim large numbers of people, but they force millions more to flee their homes and farms and devastate the country's national economies. Africa, in particular, has been hit hard by armed conflicts in recent years, and that is one major reason for worsening poverty there.

Most wars are civil wars, although many of them spill over into neighboring countries. They tend to take place in poor countries with weak governments. Often they go on for years. The violence may be on-going or it may break out sporadically and then stop for a while, only to reappear several years later. In many cases it is hard to separate out political, ideological, ethnic, or religious factors from simple criminal activity and resource-grabbing.

A large portion of the armed conflicts occur in forested regions. (See box 1) There are a number of reasons for that. Forested regions tend to be inaccessible and easy for armies to hide in. Armies have been able to fund their activities by extorting money from petroleum, mining, and logging companies, drug dealers, and farmers in these areas, or to carry out mining, logging, and drug trafficking operations themselves. Soldiers often survive by hunting and fishing and preying on isolated farmers in remote

forested areas. Many people living in these areas deeply resent the fact that they have been neglected and / or mistreated by national governments, particularly if they perceive outsiders as benefiting from the local natural resources. The influx of migrants of other ethnic groups often stirs conflicts with local people. Armed groups of various types and inclinations frequently earn a certain degree of local support or acceptance by filling the vacuum left by a very weak presence of the national government.

Box 1: Some Tropical Countries with Armed Conflicts in Forested Regions in the Past Twenty Years

Angola, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cote D'Ivoire, Guatemala, Guinea, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Liberia, Mozambique, Mexico, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Philippines, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Sudan, Surinam, and Uganda.

These features are more prominent in some cases than in others, and each case has a unique set of circumstances and combination of factors promoting violence. Mountainous and arid areas share many similar characteristics. They are certainly not unique to forests, but the fact that they apply to forests is nonetheless crucially important.

Over the last five years, international recognition of the problem of armed conflict

in forested regions has grown rapidly. Workshops on the topic have been held in Colombia, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United States, among others. A number of global studies and comparative research projects have focused on different aspects of this phenomenon.

These events and research activities have focused on different aspects of the problem.

Some have been more concerned with the **role of natural resources in contributing to armed conflict**. The academics concerned with this aspect have largely tended to fall into three main groups: 1) Neo-Malthusians typically argue that depleting natural resources has made people poorer and more desperate and led them to fight over land, water, grazing rights, and forests. 2) Followers of Paul Collier argue that armed groups are more likely to focus on grabbing commercially value resources such as oil, minerals, cash crops, and timber, and use these resources to finance their activities. 3) Political ecologists are more likely to emphasize violence caused either by the grievance of traditionally marginalized groups or by wealthy and powerful actors that seek to suppress them.

Other initiatives have looked more at **the impact of armed conflict on forests and forest dwelling people, as well as on conservation and forestry efforts**. This work has unambiguously shown that forest dwellers are among the groups that armed conflicts harm the most and that war has very negative impacts on formal conservation and forestry efforts. Fuelwood collection, hunting, and logging by refugees and displaced people also frequently cause major environmental damage. The net impact of armed conflict on forest cover and

biodiversity, however, is much more mixed and varied. On the one hand, armies build roads and clear some areas for military purposes, log and hunt to support their activities, contribute to the refugee problems described above and undermine conservation and forestry efforts. Yet on the other hand, armed conflicts often lead to large areas being abandoned, forests growing back, and animals returning. In a few cases insurgent groups have implemented their own conservation policies.

There has also been a lot of interest in **best practices for conservation and forest management in contexts of conflict or potential conflict**. This has been based largely, but not entirely, on the practical experiences of conservation and community forestry initiatives operating in conflict areas, and on efforts to reduce the environmental impacts of refugees. Some evidence suggests that community forestry efforts reduce the incidence of violent conflict, although the record is clearly mixed. There have also been some notable successes in maintaining conservation efforts even in areas of extreme conflict.

An increasing number of countries find themselves in **post-conflict situations**. These can pose particular risks to forests, as governments remain weak, there are often many armed people looking for ways to make a living, and economic activity recovers in the forested areas.

This special issue of ETFRN brings together in one place reports about many of these previous research efforts and field experiences, written by the researchers and practitioners who have been most active in this field. We have tried to get a balance

between global overview pieces and articles focusing on specific countries, as well as a balance between Africa, Asia, and Latin America. We also made a special effort to assemble the key references on this topic and to provide information about what they include and how readers can access them. We sincerely hope that our readers find this information useful and that it contributes to more effective efforts to reduce armed conflict in forested regions and the environmental and social impacts of those conflicts that do occur. Hopefully it can also contribute to more effective forestry and conservation initiatives in post-conflict situations.

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STRUGGLES OVER RESOURCE WEALTH AND CONFLICT*

By Michael Renner

Abundant natural resources—such as oil, minerals, metals, diamonds and other gemstones, timber, and agricultural commodities including drug crops—have fueled a large number of violent conflicts. Resource exploitation played a role in about a quarter of the roughly 50 wars and armed conflicts of recent years. More than 5 million people were killed in resource-related conflicts during the 1990s. Close to 6 million fled to neighboring countries, and anywhere from 11–15 million people were displaced inside their own countries.¹

The money derived from often illicit resource exploitation in war zones has secured an ample supply of arms for various armed factions and has served to enrich a handful of people—warlords, corrupt government officials, and unscrupulous corporate leaders. But for the vast majority of the population in affected countries, these conflicts have brought a torrent of arms trafficking, human rights violations, humanitarian disasters, and environmental destruction. Ample endowments of coveted resources have helped push these countries to the bottom of most measures of human development.²

In places like Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Colombia, and Sudan, the pillaging of resources allowed violent conflicts to continue that were initially driven by grievances or secessionist and ideological struggles. Revenues from