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Liberian forests to be flattened by secret logging contracts **Outcome of Liberian President's investigation critical**

A quarter of Liberia's total landmass has been granted to logging companies in just two years, following an explosion in the use of secretive and often illegal logging permits, an investigation by Global Witness, Save My Future Foundation (SAMFU) and Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) shows. Unless this crisis is tackled immediately, the country's forests could suffer widespread devastation, leaving the people who depend upon them stranded and undoing the country's fragile progress following the resource-fuelled conflicts of 1989 to 2003.

The new logging contracts – termed Private Use Permits – now cover 40 percent of Liberia's forests and almost half of Liberia's best intact forests. They have given companies linked to notorious Malaysian logging giant Samling unparalleled access to some of Liberia's most pristine forests. Samling and its subsidiaries have been involved in numerous cases of illegal logging in countries around the world, from Cambodia to Guyana to Papua New Guinea.

Designed to allow private land owners to cut trees on their property, Private Use Permits are being used by companies to avoid Liberia's carefully-crafted forest laws and regulations. Companies holding these permits are not required to log sustainably and pay little in compensation to either the Liberian Government or the people who own the forests for the right to export valuable tropical timber.

"Private Use Permits are great news for logging companies. They are very bad news for pretty much everybody else in Liberia," said Robert Nyahn of Save My Future Foundation. "Some communities will receive less than one percent of their timber's value, while very little revenue will reach state coffers. Since the end of Liberia's war we have worked with the Government and international partners like the United States, the EU and the World Bank to ensure the Liberian people get sustainable benefits from their forests. These Private Use Permits severely undermine these reform efforts."

During the country's conflict, timber exports were used to buy guns and former President Charles Taylor treated the forests as his personal bank account. (1) Since 2003, as part of an extensive post-conflict reform process, the US has committed a reported US\$ 30 million to promoting the rights of forest residents. The EU and the Liberian Government have also recently negotiated a groundbreaking trade agreement meant to ensure that Liberia provides legal timber to European markets. The briefing warns that the current crisis threatens to undermine these efforts, as well as devastating the country's forests.

The investigations by Global Witness, SAMFU and SDI show that:

- 66 Private Use Permits have been issued covering 26,000 km², over 23 percent of Liberia's territory;
- Some documents justifying the permits, including at least one of the private land deeds necessary for the Permits to be legal, have been forged;
- People who own and live in concession areas were not properly consulted and were not able to change key contractual terms when told to sign their forests away. As a result communities will receive only a tiny proportion of logging revenues; and
- Companies and officials within the Government's Forestry Development Authority have ignored a moratorium placed on Private Use Permits in February of this year by allowing new Permits to begin operating.

"People being defrauded out of their forest rights at this speed and scale is worrying in itself. When you look at who the forests have been given to, it gets even more alarming," said Jonathan Gant of Global

Witness. “Atlantic Resources, a logging company linked to notorious Malaysian giant Samling, now controls 8 percent of Liberia’s land area through Private Use Permits despite owing millions in back taxes. Giving your forests to companies like that is not a sustainable investment.” (2)

In recent weeks, as the scope of the Private Use Permits problem becomes clear, the Liberian Government has begun to react. In August, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf reaffirmed that the February moratorium was in place and announced that the Permits would be investigated. Responding in force, the Liberian Timber Association – a local trade association – has filed complaints with both the Liberian Senate and Supreme Court.

“Recent statements by President Johnson Sirleaf are promising, but the response of the Liberian Timber Association is a major concern,” said Silas Siakor of Sustainable Development Institute. “Too frequently, those who abuse Liberia’s natural resources have not been held to account. If Liberia’s forests and the people who depend upon them are not to be swallowed whole by Private Use Permits then the suspension of logging operations must stand this time and a comprehensive independent investigation must be undertaken.”

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Note to editors

1. In April of this year the Special Court for Sierra Leone found Taylor guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the war in Sierra Leone. The ruling highlighted the role that natural resources played during the conflict that country.

2. On 23 August 2012, Global Witness wrote to Samling to request comment regarding these issues. As of 30 August 2012 the company had provided no response.

3. To accompany this release, Global Witness, SAMFU and SDI have produced the brief *Signing their Lives away* outlining in detail the findings of the three organizations’ investigations. This brief may be found at www.globalwitness.org/signingtheirlivesaway.