

## **Press Release**

July 31, 2008

### **Government of Liberia puts forest reforms in jeopardy**

The Government of Liberia is threatening its own reform process and putting the rule of law in the forest sector at risk. Some key decisions taken over the last few months, if not reversed, could undermine efforts to reestablish the rule of law in the sector and also plunge some communities into conflict when logging restarts. The NGO Coalition for Liberia warns that the forest sector is gradually slipping back into the old ways of doing business and if not checked the country will once again be exposed to widespread illegal logging.

A briefing<sup>1</sup> released by the NGO Coalition for Liberia today summarizes a series of issues relating to the conduct of the Forestry Development Authority (FDA), including the letting of logging contracts to companies of dubious financial capacity and contracting loggers to forest areas which are the private property of local communities. The National Forestry Reform Law (2006) explicitly forbids the granting of Timber Sale Contracts and Forest Management Contracts on private land<sup>2</sup>. The Government of Liberia must address these issues to ensure that the rule of law is not compromised in its quest to reopen the sector by the end of 2008.

The briefing reveals that many of the first thirteen (13) logging contractors do not have the capital that is required to implement the contracts for which they submitted bids. For example, two companies including one of the most visible companies in the country failed to demonstrate that they had sufficient funds to capitalize their investments. Ironically many companies submitted unrealistically high bids, thus raising concerns amongst experts that “*there may be increased pressures to over harvest to pay the high land rental price, to not follow sustainable forest management practices or to ‘cut and run’*”<sup>3</sup> before their contract is over.

Allowing companies without sufficient capital into the sector presents a major risk for the future as they will be unable to fulfill their obligations to the government and the communities. Liberians will then once again lose our forests yet be denied the income the government expects from logging.

The NGO Coalition calls on the FDA Managing Director, Hon. John T. Woods, and the Inter-Ministerial Concession Committee (IMCC) to make public the bid evaluation and due diligence reports for all bidders to enable members of the public judge for themselves the types of investment these investors are bringing into the sector.

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<sup>1</sup>**Reform in Jeopardy**: reflections on the forest sector reform process in Liberia, July 31, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Sections 5.3b(ii) & 5.4b(ii) of the National Forestry Reform Law (2006) of Liberia

<sup>3</sup> UN Panel of Experts on Liberia, Report S/2008/371, 12 June 2008

The Coalition is also concerned that the Government's decision to allocate three contracts for forest in Bokomu and Gou Nwolaila Districts violates the rights of the communities in those districts. In a resolution<sup>4</sup> presented to county officials, in the presence of the FDA Managing Director and other senior official, a representative of the UN Mission in Liberia, as well as representatives of several logging companies, these communities made it clear that they would resist any attempt to log in their area without their consent. By refusing to address the communities concerns, the FDA is creating a situation that will pitch the communities against the companies that have been granted contracts in the area. This is a dangerous precedent and could backfire with serious consequences, including conflicts between the loggers and those communities.

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**Editor's Note:**

The NGOs Coalition for Liberia is an informal network of organizations working to promote sustainable management of natural resources in Liberia. The Coalition comprises of fifteen (15) organizations working on a range of issues relating to natural resource management and conservation.

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<sup>4</sup> This resolution, signed by all the local government officials in the two districts, the traditional leaders of those communities, and a cross section of the citizens from the two districts was presented to the Gbarpolu County leadership on July 15, 2008. More than 100 persons attended the meeting to develop and present this resolution. Almost all of them had walked for several hours, some for as many as sixteen (16) hours simply to make their case to the FDA.