

La Socamba:

How Cameroon's stolen
wood reaches
international markets

Introduction

Relative to area, Cameroon's forests are among the most species-rich in the Congo basin, containing the region's most biologically diverse forests, providing valuable habitat for endangered Western Lowland Gorillas, chimpanzees and forest elephants, amongst other species. Unsustainable and illegal logging in these forests is leading to deforestation, destruction of the ecosystem and diminished resilience to climate change. Creation of roads by logging companies facilitates bushmeat hunting poses another key threat to Cameroon's biodiversity, often preventing proper regeneration of logged forest habitats (Bikié et al., 2000).

Uncontrolled logging operations in Cameroon are also a frequent cause of social conflicts, as they frequently occur without the consent of forest dependent communities, who see their resource-base destroyed with rarely any benefit in return.

On 9 September 2015, Greenpeace published a report about how the Cameroonian firm Compagnie de Commerce et de Transport (CCT) has been trading wood from a large number of Cameroonian logging companies (Greenpeace Nederland, 2015). Many of those suppliers are logging with small cutting permits called "sales of standing volume" (hereinafter referred to as VCs from the French *ventes de coupe*). VCs cover an area of maximum 2500 hectares and have a validity of maximum three years (Art. 55, Law N° 94/01).

VC logging represents "cut-and-run" logging of a highly destructive nature: typically they are rapidly exploited in a highly destructive manner, as no management plan is legally required. There is frequent fraud and corruption in the allocation of the permits, which is also frequently associated to illegal logging (CONAC, 2012) (Hoare, 2015).

The Greenpeace report listed CCT's main 2014 suppliers, providing evidence that several of were involved in illegal logging activities. A frequently observed infringement was that of logging outside the boundaries of the VC, then subsequent declaring of this illegal wood as originating from the legal logging title ("laundering the timber").

Hardly a week after the Greenpeace report was published, the Cameroonian Minister of Forestry and Wildlife, Ngole Philip Ngwese, reacted to the Greenpeace report with a full page article published in several Cameroonian newspapers (Ngwese, 2015). He claimed that the Greenpeace information was false and that the activities of all the companies cited in the report as timber suppliers to CCT were fully compliant with the law.

On 8 March 2016 the Dutch food and consumer product safety authority (NVWA) announced it had filed a report with the public prosecutor against Dutch timber trader for violating the European Timber Regulation (EUTR). The NVWA judged that the trader had not taken measures to mitigate the risk that illegal wood was placed on the market. It added the action was based on information provided in Greenpeace's report about CCT. Fibois, the company in question and a regular importer of CCT-wood, received a conditional penalty to be paid "[...] if they continue to place timber on the market without a fully functioning due diligence system" (NVWA, 2016).

In a reaction, the Cameroonian Minister of Forestry and Wildlife repeated that the information provided by Greenpeace was composed of untruths. He claimed that none of the CCT suppliers concerned were, in the present case and based on the facts in his possession, involved in illegal logging.

Dwelling on the allegedly excellent collaboration between the European Union (EU) and the Cameroonian government in the implementation of the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) on forest law enforcement governance and trade (FLEGT), he also boasted that the issuance of the first FLEGT licenses is being planned (MINFOF, 2016).

Other key stakeholders, such as the Cameroonian timber industry interest group Groupement de la Filière de Bois du Cameroun, (GFBC) appear to have had a different take on the behaviour CCT:

"The Minister took the wrong target. He panics as if it's the Cameroonian state that was sanctioned, instead of dissociating himself from a non-virtuous company like CCT," as one observer of the Cameroonian forest sector stated, in an article in Jeune Afrique (Mbadi, 2016).

Also, the negotiations between the EU and the Cameroonian government concerning the VPA implementation may be going slightly less smoothly than the Minister suggests. *“Cameroon: There was a JIC meeting at the end of 2015 where the EC questioned the interest of Cameroon in a VPA. Challenge of transferring TLAS (Timber Legality Assurance System) to the government. There are major issues regarding legal compliance”*, is stated in a summary record of a recent EUTR/FLEGT expert group meeting (European Commission, 2016).

La Socamba’s VC 09 01 203

This briefing presents the results of an investigation into the logging activities of another CCT supplier, Ets. La Socamba (hereinafter referred to as La Socamba).

According to the data available on the World Resources Institute (WRI) and the Cameroonian Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife (MINFOF)’s Interactive Forest Atlas of Cameroon, until 31 December 2015, La Socamba held two VC titles. The 2000 hectares VC 09 01 203, in the Djoum district, South region was issued on 17 April 2013 and expired on 31 December 2015 (World Resources Institute, 2015).

The 2396 hectares VC 08 01 229, in the Nanga Eboko district in the Center region, was issued on 16 April 2014 and is valid until 31 December 2016 (World Resources Institute, 2015). While the latter was included in the MINFOF’s July 2014 list of operational forestry titles, it was absent from the October 2015 list (MINFOF, 2014 and MINFOF, 2015). In October 2014 and January 2016, Greenpeace undertook field investigations in and around La Socamba’s VC 09 01 203.

Anonymous testimonies from various key persons, including local residents and authorities, as well as ex-employees, indicated that throughout that period La Socamba was involved in illegal logging practices. We documented the markings of VC 09 01 203 on several stumps and abandoned logs, up to 8 kilometres outside the legal boundaries of La Socamba’s logging title.

Out-of-boundary logging is punishable by a fine of CFA franc 200,000 (about EUR 300) to CFA franc 1 million (about EUR 1,500) and/or imprisonment of a 1-6 months (Art. 156, Law N° 94/01). Violations of the Forestry Law may result in suspension, or, in the case of repeated violations, cancellation of title or logging license (Art. 65, Law N° 94/01). Given it was not possible to explore every single logging road or skid track in the area, the observed illegalities could well be the tip of the iceberg.

On 4 April 2016, Greenpeace wrote to the Cameroonian Minister of Forestry and Wildlife regarding the findings of the investigation and solicited comments and feedback prior to this publication (Greenpeace Africa, 2016). At the time of publishing this briefing, however, we had as of yet received no response from the Ministry.

La Socamba wood on the international market

CCT is the principal exporter of logs from La Socamba's VC 09 01 203. La Socamba, in turn, was an important supplier to CCT in 2014 and 2015 (Greenpeace, 2015). Greenpeace investigations in China in July 2014 and March 2015 revealed the presence of huge amounts of CCT-logs in the port of Zhangjiagang in Jiangsu province, including logs with the marks of La Socamba's VC 09 01 203.

CCT sawn wood is also exported to the EU and has been documented on the premises of traders in Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain, raising the question how operators reconcile their due diligence obligation with CCT's supply chain which is contaminated with illegally logged wood.



A pile of CCT logs in the Chinese port of Zhangjiagang. The large log in the center left has the marks of La Socamba's VC 09 01 203. 25/03/2015. © Greenpeace



A log with the marks of CCT and La Socamba's VC 09 01 203 in the Chinese port of Zhangjiagang. 14/08/2014. © Greenpeace



*Despite repeated warnings about CCT's doubtful practices, CCT sawn timber continues to enter the Belgian market via the port of Antwerp. How can they know this wood was legally harvested?
13/01/2016. © Greenpeace*

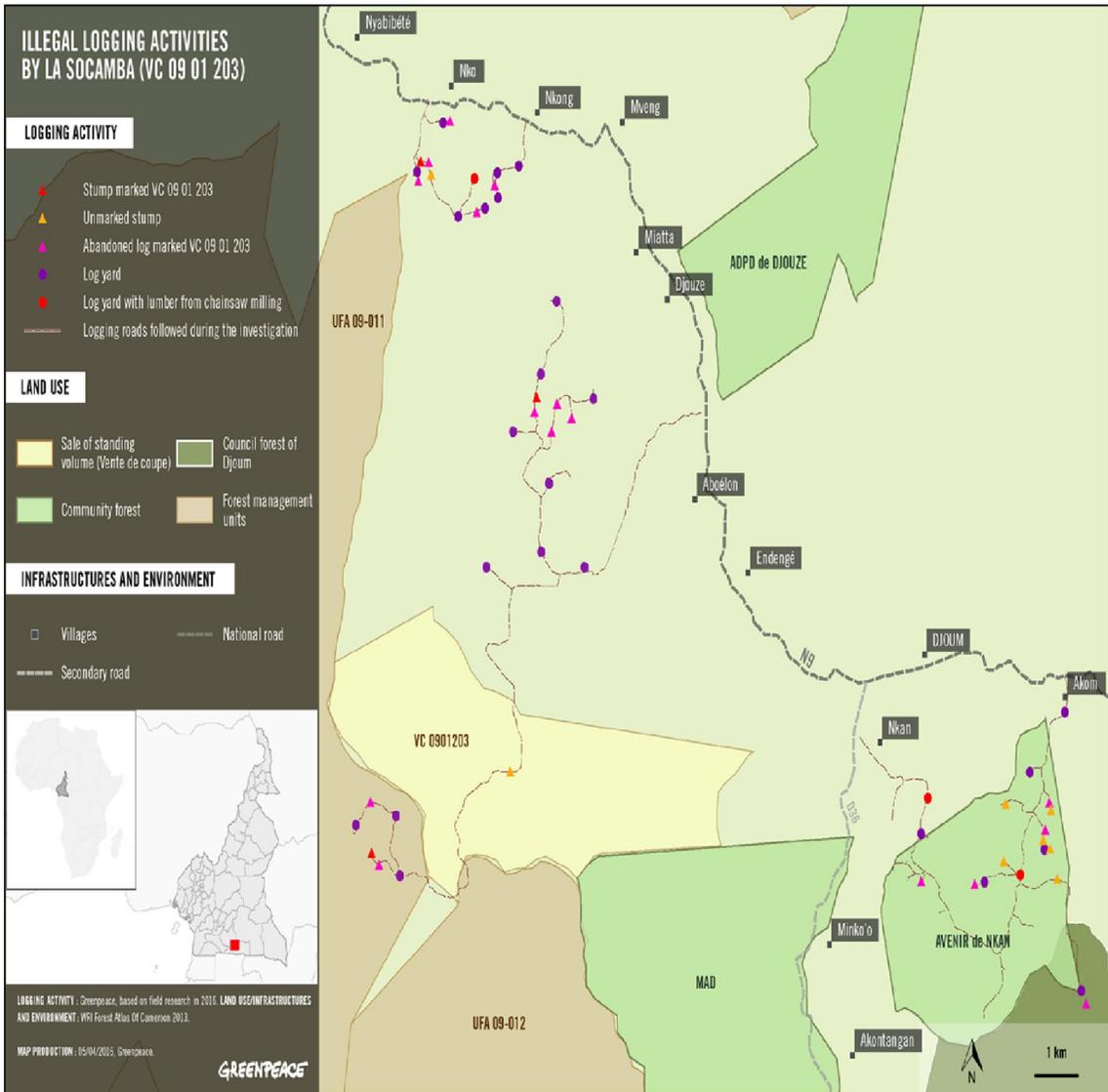
According to the most recent available data, Belgium is the top importer of timber from Cameroon in the EU, accounting for about 25% of the traded value (Saunders, 2016). But despite its role as a hub in the international timber trade, Belgium remains structurally incapable of enforcing EUTR.

Since the EUTR became fully applicable in Belgium in June 2014, human resources allocated to enforcement remained limited to a ½ full time equivalent. Six checks on operators were carried out in 2014 and only ten during 2015 (Federal public service health, food chain safety and environment, 2015). Between August and October 2015, four companies trading CCT timber were checked by the Belgian authorities but no violations of the EUTR were detected.

While other member states are speeding up the number of checks and starting to issue sanctions, no sanction was ever imposed on Belgian operators.

January 2016 field investigation

The map below shows a selection of the findings of the January 2016 Greenpeace field investigation.



Apart from a network of logging roads, logs and stumps marked VC 09 01 203 were found in three areas outside La Socamba's logging title:

(1) in the neighbouring Forest Management Unit (FMU) 09 011, part of the Permanent Forest Estate, a logging concession held by the company Société Industrielle des Bois MJP & Frères (SIBM) (MINFOF, 2015). The logs documented at this location were marked with the dates of 20 February and 2 April 2015. In the same area, unmarked stumps and traces of chainsaw milling (planks) were also observed.



A log with the hammer marks of La Socamba's VC 09 01 203 and cutting date 2 April 2015, N2° 39'13.11"; E12° 34'20.59", more than 1 km outside the logging title. 12/01/2016 © Greenpeace



A log with the marks of La Socamba's VC 09 01 203 and cutting date 20 February 2015, N2° 39'13.11"; E12° 34'20.59". 12/01/2016 © Greenpeace

(2) in the Non-Permanent Forest Estate in the area of the villages of Aboélon, Djouze, Miatta, Mveng, Nkong and Nko; West of the village of Aboélon, more than 3 km outside the VC boundaries, the investigation team documented logging roads, along with several log yards containing abandoned logs marked VC 09 01 203, expanding into the forests of Djouze and Miatta. Similar observations were made in the forests of the Mveng, Nkong and Nko.



A log with the marks of La Socamba's VC 09 01 203 and cutting date 08 November 2014 in the forest of Nko, N2°45'1.24"; E12°35'18.47", more than 7 km outside the logging title. 13/01/2016 © Greenpeace



Logging road in the forest of Miatta, N2°43'3.32"; E12°36'27.01". 12/01/2016 © Greenpeace

According to testimonies of local residents, La Socamba systematically presented the villages with *faits accomplis*. First, the company opened illegal secondary roads logging into the forests. When the villagers noticed this, they protested against the intrusion, prompting a company representative to reportedly visit them to apologize and offering 1500 CFA Franc (2.2 EUR) per m³ wood taken from the forest or from individual plots.

In the absence of trained scalers amongst the villagers, it is impossible for them to know the exact volume of wood removed from their land. Several people told the investigation team they are convinced the administrative authorities of Djoum are fully aware of the illegal activities of La Socamba, but are failing to intervene.

We were also told that illegally felled logs are hammer-marked in the local forest post of Djoum before being transported to Douala. This logging scam by La Socamba would have taken place between 2014 and March 2015. Villagers of Nko complained that the company left without paying for the trees that had been felled in fields belonging to local farmers.

Greenpeace considers it unlikely that illegal activities on such a scale could go on for more than a year without the complicity of local authorities. Informal payments are reportedly often used by logging companies to buy their silence and to appease local communities.

(3) in the villages of Nkan and Akom, inside the community forest Avenir de Nkan, as well as in the neighbouring council forest of Djoum.

Finally, logs from the community forest of Nkan and the council forest of Djoum have also been laundered with the VC number 09 01 203. According to testimonies, in May 2015, La Socamba made an agreement to log with the Groupement d'Intérêt Communautaire (GIC) of the community forest Avenir de Nkan.

The details of this agreement are unknown to us, but our investigation in Avenir de Nkan revealed that the company opened a main logging road leading from Nkan to Akom. Along this road, we documented several secondary logging roads leading to log yards. Here, the number VC 09 01 203 was again used, apparently by La Socamba, to launder the logs from this logging operation.



Around October-November 2015, shortly before the expiration of the VC, La Socamba reportedly halted its operations and left the area.

Greenpeace's investigation into the operations of La Socamba, a principal supplier of CCT, once again underlines the high level of risk associated with the purchasing of CCT timber. Greenpeace reiterates its concerns about the exercising of due diligence by importing companies (operators).

Proper due diligence by these companies may prove impossible in the absence of systematic field checks into the operations that CCT sources its timber from.

Greenpeace therefore urges that the following measures are taken:

- For the Cameroonian Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife: immediately investigate all CCT suppliers and sanction them when illegal activities are confirmed.
- For the EU and Cameroon: work towards credible implementation of the Voluntary Partnership Agreement; re-establish a system of credible Independent Monitoring of Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade in Cameroon
- For the Chinese government: introduce strong legislation that prohibits illegally harvested timber or timber products from entering the Chinese market.

Greenpeace urges member states' competent authorities:

(i) to treat timber from Cameroon as high risk and require stringent due diligence standards from importing companies until the government of Cameroon can prove beyond reasonable doubts that it is properly enforcing the country's forestry laws and regulations;

(ii) investigate operators trading in CCT wood and carry out checks to verify whether the companies identified as operators in the present case have both a proper due diligence system in place, and have correctly carried out due diligence so as to comply with the requirements set out in Articles 4 and 6 of the EUTR.

In case of failure to comply with the due diligence requirements, we urge the competent authorities to sanction the operators in accordance with Article 19 of the EUTR and the other relevant EU and national law provisions.

For operators in Europe: consider all Cameroon wood as high risk in the context of the EUTR's due diligence obligation and cancel all contracts with CCT until it is possible to check legality of that wood in a reliable manner.

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