

weeklyreview

Leave it in the ground Ecuador wants the West to pay it not to pump oil **International Development, page 43 »**



Sold down the river

Bags of sugar and a few bars of soap – with these foreign loggers gain rights to one of the greatest forests in the world. *John Vidal* reports from Congo

If there is one person who has shaped the way the West has seen Africa for 100 years, it is Joseph Conrad, who travelled up the river Congo as a seaman in 1890 and then wrote his short classic, *Heart Of Darkness*. The book chronicles a European merchant's journey to a town on the equator that the Belgians called Stanleyville but is now Kisangani. There he finds Kurtz, a trader losing his sanity and soul as he exploits the local people.

Earlier this year, after many years of anticipation, I, too, reached Kisangani. Conrad recounted how, as a nine-year-old, he had been fascinated by the empty map of Africa and had longed to go to this country. I, too, had imagined the great walls of trees, the river sweeping 1,500km up from the south and then bending west towards the Atlantic, the Pygmies, the dia-

monds and what many writers have referred to as the "green heart of the world".

Unlike Conrad, I had to make the journey by plane. A decade of civil war that began in the 1990s has cost at least 2 million lives and led to endless destruction and political turmoil since. Central Congo is no longer at war, but Kisangani and the upper Congo are more isolated and harder to reach than they were 100 years ago. Instead of the 10 or more river boats that every day used to ply between the capital, Kinshasa, and Kisangani, there are only a few barges now.

In Kisangani there's precious little of the once-prosperous Stanleyville built for 5,000 colonials in the 20s. The whole of the city in the jungle is now crumbling in the steaming heat and most of its buildings are pockmarked after three major battles in 10 years between Ugandan and Rwandan armies.

It is a beleaguered, impoverished, shot-up hole, a dangerous frontier town with a busted economy, but it is still one of Africa's great trading centres and the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) third-largest city. There are streets of diamond dealers waiting for the miners who slip in with their small hidden packages in hope of riches; ivory traders, fishers, coffee growers, former soldiers, nuns, cloth merchants and chancers. But Conrad would recognise little, mainly because the dense jungle that framed his novel is being felled at an alarming rate.

The only way to find out what is happening in Congo's jungles today is to go by boat with locals. I hook up with René Ngongo, a young Congolese academic who runs Ocean, an ecological group based in Kinshasa. With us come Stephan Van Praet, Greenpeace International **Continued on page 26 »**

Weekly review

«Continued from page 25 Africa forest campaign coordinator, and Jean-Faustin Lakondo and Joel Bofando, two young MPs who have just been elected to Equator province's first parliament. We hire a 10m-long pirogue, or dugout canoe, and set off down river for the village of Isangi, their home territory, on the edge of the great forest a day away.

Isangi is spread along the banks of the Congo at its junction with the river Lomami. All seems calm when we arrive, but it is clear from a meeting held at dusk that people are greatly agitated. Four years ago, Safbois, a part-American, part Belgian-owned conglomerate, was awarded a massive logging concession of more than 260,000 sq km just to the south of the town, and it is now felling the forest for the precious afrormosia tree – African teak.

One by one in the sweaty night, members of local human rights groups, churchmen, villagers and government officers stand up to condemn the company, which they say will profit from their trees while providing little or nothing for them: their hunting grounds are being destroyed, their access to wild food denied, there are no jobs.

“Our forests are being stolen from us,” says one villager. “It is misery for the communities. Safbois has come in and is taking our future. We do not know what to do.”

They accuse the government of harassment and Safbois of failing to keep its promises. When a company is granted a concession from central government to log in Congo, it must sign an agreement with the local chiefs and hereditary landowners, who give permission for it to extract the trees in return for development packages. In this case, on September 15, 2004, Safbois signed a contract with three villages to build three schools and hospitals, to repair roads, employ some local people, and provide four motorbikes and 160 bicycles for the village.

Many recognise echoes of the past in this arrangement. In Conrad's day, Congo was the Congo Free State, the personal property of King Leopold of Belgium – later, in 1908, the Belgian state took over and it became Belgian Congo. The king, together with the explorer and journalist Henry Morton Stanley, devised the concession system whereby the country was carved up into vast tranches for companies to do with what they liked, so long as they paid the king 50% of their income. Few chiefs had any idea what they were signing away in exchange for the cloth, trinkets and alcohol they were given.

“History is repeating itself,” Bofando says. “We are being forced to hand over our forests for nothing. It is leading to misery.”

Yafunga, four hours away, is one village promised a school by Safbois. But there is no new school. There is a makeshift shelter of greenwood, half-covered in corrugated iron, with no sides, no floor, no windows. One big storm would bring it down.

The chief, who is clearly upset, says: “I did not know. I had no idea of the profits that can be made from the trees. A grave injustice has been done . . . We really had no say. The meeting with the company started at 11pm and finished at 3am. The police were there and the military and the authorities. We felt threatened. We were not allowed to ask questions. It was intimidation . . . We are afraid of the authorities. We had to sign it.”

So we go to see Safbois, accompanied by a crowd of villagers. The company has built a small port where once there was a graveyard on the edge of the pristine Lomami river. We find Florimont Ugalomaswa, the company's personnel officer, at its logging camp. He tries to defend the company against charges that it employs few people from the villages nearby.

“When we came here we needed people with experience. We could not find chauffeurs, drivers or



For all the talk of sustainable forestry, removing just one tree means building roads that smash through the jungle. For 40 million people, including this Pygmy (below) carrying an antelope home from a hunt, the forest is vital to survival. Villagers, right, still have no school
Kate Eshelby; Jiro Ose/Redux/Eyevine



‘Our forests are being stolen from us. They are taking our future. It is misery for us. We do not know what to do’ – Isangi villager



chainsaw men," he says. "We employ 83 people, including 30-35 day workers from the communities."

"They are paid less than \$1 a day," one man says.

"Where is the school that you promised two and a half years ago?" asks an angry woman.

"The school is there!" Ugalomaswa says. The villagers laugh. "We have said we would build a school in each community, but we have had three directors of the company here in three years. The problem has been changes in management. Things happen now. We are building the schools."

It is a brave but hopeless performance.

The next day we set off back up the Congo towards Kisangani. "The European perception of the Congo as the dark heart of Africa or the world is completely wrong," René Ngongo says. "For us, the river and the forest have always been the heart of life. We are all here thanks to the river. The forest is full of riches. We have fish weighing 100kg. At night it lives... For us the forest has always been our mother. It can be compared to your supermarkets. Everyone depends on it. What is happening is that the exploiters promise to improve living conditions by cutting down the forest. It's a paradox we do not understand."

After several hours' slow passage against the current, a speedboat comes towards us. It swerves into us and nearly swamps our fragile pirogue with its wash. One white man photographs us, the other steers and gives V-signs. We almost capsizes. "It's the loggers," Ngongo says. "They are warning us."

In Conrad's day, 40 companies shared an area larger than France as their personal fiefdoms. King Leopold took 50% from all the ivory, rubber, gold, diamonds or wood that the concessionaries traded. The companies in turn used slave labour, floggings, mutilation and murder to extract the resources. To-

day, the state has effectively collapsed and the World Bank in Washington has been funding the reconstruction of the country's shattered economy. It has decided to go along with the concession system.

Greenpeace research shows that the country has been carved up, just as in King Leopold's day, and there are now 156 concessions covering an area of mostly intact rainforest – far bigger than England and Wales put together. In theory, the companies must pay government nearly \$18m rent a year for these concessions, of which 40% should be returned to provincial governments for development. In practice, Van Praet says, "There is very little evidence that companies pay either on time or in full, and little or nothing goes back to the provinces."

"What is at stake is enormous," Ngongo says. "Two-thirds of the people in Congo, 40 million people, depend on this forest to provide food, medicines and building materials. It is critical for the survival of the people and animals. This is also one of the biggest stores of carbon in the world, so it is critical, too, for climate change. Yet the companies are being encouraged to take what they can."

Research by Ngongo and Ocean shows that isolated communities are being persuaded to sign away, for just a few machetes and bags of salt, the rights to the forests on which they have depended for millions of years. One company gave a community 18 bars of soap, four packets of soup, 24 bottles of beer and two bags of sugar.

"It is happening everywhere," Ngongo says. "Concessions are being given out, and the villagers are not being told what the chiefs are signing up to. Communities are in chaos and there is more and more social conflict. It is a cruel system that continues the injustices and atrocities of the colonial system but it is even worse because it deprives communities of their resources and consigns them to perpetual poverty." The concessionary system is so far found only in Africa but it may yet spread to the great forest areas of, say, South America.

At last we go to Safois' headquarters in Kinshasa. The inner sanctum of one of the most powerful companies in Africa is the office of David Blattner, its financial director. It is furnished like a hotel room, with pictures of the great Congolese forests.

"Congo can only do sustainable forestry," Blattner says. "The infrastructure is so poor, and the costs of extracting wood so great, that you cannot clear-cut. We take just a few logs per acre. After five years you can't see the difference. And the money goes to the country."

He's right – up to a point. What he doesn't say is that to take out just one valuable tree requires roads to be built deep into the forest, which means hundreds of other trees are cut or smashed down – often the very ones that the communities need for medicines and foods. The companies do not replant and they leave the forest vulnerable to floods of hunters and other farmers moving in to pull down more.

"You can never replace the big trees," Ngongo says. "The forest will never recover the wildlife. In Conrad's day, traders such as Kurtz took only the ivory. Now the companies are taking everything, including the chance to develop."

The situation is far from how it was in Conrad's day. Blattner is no ranting Kurtz, nor are there atrocities. What is happening, though, is unjust and ecologically cruel. The same concessionary system that Conrad found is now accepted by the World Bank and western governments. It deprives millions of people of their resources, encourages corruption, prevents development and divides communities. The real scandal today is that, for a few square metres of flooring or a bedpost, the second-greatest forest in the world is being destroyed, probably for ever.

My two cents

Search for perfection not without pain

George Saunders

Each nation has its own wonderful peculiarities. The French are gourmands, the British scrappy in the face of hardship, the Belgians – well, I don't know any Belgians. The Belgians are, we must conclude, a secretive, ashamed people.

Americans are perfectionists. We look around and think: nice world – can we make it better? If only we could become perfect, we feel, we might yet be worthy of love. Recently I read that Britney Spears was thinking of whitening her infant son's teeth. His baby teeth. They're going to fall out. But Britney, like all Americans, aspires to perfection.

Besides, I'm almost 50 and am still trying to get straight teeth. True: my dentist has me on a series of hard plastic retainers that slowly but surely are forcing my bottom teeth into some semblance of straightness. Why am I doing this? It's actually kind of pathetic. Why don't I just give up and go, crooked-toothed, to my grave? Why don't I just lie down and have someone cover me and my wild-ass teeth with dirt?

Because a yearning for perfection is in our American DNA. Unfortunately, in my case, buffoonery is also in my DNA. Yesterday, as I got into my car, my retainer flew out of my pocket (where I keep it 90% of the time, because it hurts like hell) and landed under the front tyre. I then got into my car and unwittingly backed over my own retainer.

I recently dropped my electric toothbrush down the toilet while using it to clean my retainer. Trying to retrieve my toothbrush, I dropped my retainer down the toilet. While I hopped around the bathroom, angrily cursing my luck, my wallet popped out of my pocket, joining the toothbrush and retainer in the toilet. In a rage, I slipped on the floor and cracked my jaw on the toilet rim. Luckily, my teeth were unharmed.

Anyway, there on the driveway was my sad little squashed retainer, now suitable only for a werewolf. I could feel my teeth drifting back into non-straightness, like continents in a geology documentary. It was maddening. So I undertook an American solution: I got drunk, went golfing, bought a boat, had an affair, and was born again into the healing arms of my Lord and personal saviour, Jesus Christ, to whom I whispered a fervent prayer: make me perfect, or at least better than everyone else, so that I, too, may be worthy of love.