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Watchdog Says Vietnamese Officials Bribed by Log Smugglers

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BANGKOK — An environmental watchdog group has accused Vietnamese government and military officials of taking payoffs to ignore vast smuggling of lucrative lumber from neighboring Cambodia.

Millions of dollars in bribes have been paid by Vietnamese timber traders to both Vietnamese and Cambodian officials, said the report issued Monday by the U.K.-based Environmental Investigation Agency.

It said the Vietnamese officials are paid off in exchange for granting import quotas for the timber and Cambodians are paid to open up logging areas and smuggling routes. The logging itself in Cambodia is often illegal, taking place in protected areas such as national parks.

Cambodia has banned the export of logs, and since early 2016 has closed its border with Vietnam to timber as well. However, Vietnam has official quotas for such imports, which are also taxed.

Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not respond to a request for comment on the report.

[...]

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Much of the timber trade is protected by military units that profit from deals with the loggers, say environmental protection groups such as Global Witness.

"We have never supported any people who are involved with timber smuggling, but we have arrested some people in the past, as well," Chhum Socheath told The Associated Press by phone.

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"Approximately 300,000 cubic meters of logs have been smuggled out of Cambodia and laundered in Vietnam under these quotas," it said, estimated the kickbacks have totaled more than \$13 million since the beginning of November 2016.

The watchdog said Vietnam and the European Union are expected to sign an agreement to ensure only legal timber is exported from Vietnam.

"This is the single largest log-smuggling operation that we have seen for years," the group's senior forests campaigner, Jago Wadley, said in a statement. "Vietnam must address this weak approach to any agreement with the EU to combat illegal logging and the associated trade."

The report said the illegal trade comes as Vietnam is working hard to protect its own forests, even as Vietnam's government "has promoted the rapid expansion of an export-oriented wood processing sector, which has become the sixth largest in the world."

It said Vietnamese exports of wood products are projected to total \$8 billion this year, while imports account for at least 80 percent of the raw materials consumed by its factories.

Cambodia and Laos, another neighbor of Vietnam, together provided Vietnam with illicit timber worth almost three quarters of a billion dollars in a single year, said the report, noting that a crackdown in Laos has shifted the smugglers' attention to Cambodia.

The Washington, D.C.-based group Forest Trends said last month that export prohibitions enacted by Laos in 2015 and 2016 appeared to be effective.

"Exports to China and Vietnam — which together import the vast majority of Lao timber — fell nearly 75 percent from 2014 to 2016, thanks in large part to this two-part government crackdown on exports, the group said in a report.

"These successes in Laos send a valuable message to other countries whose forests are under similar threats: Even when limited to imperfect and temporary measures, such as these kinds of bans, governments can achieve major progress as long as there is strong political will at the helm," said report co-author Phuc Xuan To.

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Chhum Socheath, a spokesman for Cambodia's National Defense Ministry, described the report as baseless, with not enough useful information for the government to investigate.

He said his agency had not found any officials involved in taking payoffs from smugglers to allow timber out of Cambodia, and that the figures for wood smuggled to Vietnam were overstated.

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Vietnam’s official quotas facilitate the smuggling from Cambodia and even allow Vietnam to profit by taxing the smuggled logs, the report said.

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<http://www.foxbusiness.com/markets/2017/05/08/watchdog-says-vietnamese-officials-bribed-by-log-smugglers.html>
