

# Doubts over log export ban

By Bill O'Toole | Thursday, 10 April 2014



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**Experts say an export ban on raw timber that came into effect on April 1 could have a limited impact because of a lack of clarity from the government on how the ban would work in practice, as well as the effects of the conflict in Kachin State.**



Illegal timber smuggled under the guise of a Thingyan float bearing environmental messages in April 2014

This confusion could allow unscrupulous merchants to continue selling illegally cut timber across international borders, particularly in northern Myanmar where enforcement is weak because of conflict.

“Now there’s a strong push in the [Myanmar Timber Merchants Association] and the [Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry] to clamp down on illegal logging, but it’s not clear to me what illegal logging in this context actually means,” said Kevin Woods, a researcher with the NGO Forest Trends who specialises in Myanmar’s timber sector.

“Does that mean that logging is being done by villagers and then sold to businessmen without the explicit permission of [the ministry]? Or could it also mean, as I feel it should ... logging being done by crony companies in natural, unmanaged forests?”

“None of that is clear to me from any statement made by any government officials.”

Logging has also been a continued source of conflict in Kachin State, where the Tatmadaw has launched attacks against Kachin Independence Army troops on the pretext of cracking down on the illegal timber trade.

U Win Myo Thu, co-founder of the environmental NGO EcoDev, said that very little of the timber that crosses the border into China is actually logged in border areas.

EcoDev’s field researchers have found most of the logs actually come from areas controlled by the government, such as Sagaing Region and parts of southern Kachin state, he said.

The tough terrain and conflicts in Kachin State make it difficult to track which groups are responsible for felling and transporting the timber.

“To be able to say [logs are] really illegal we really need to track the chain of custody,” he said. “[But] many of these logs begin in the deep jungle.”

Neither the government nor EcoDev has the resources to send monitors into areas that are both isolated and potentially dangerous.

Beyond the physical limitations of investigating the illegal timber trade, U Win Myo Thu said powerful groups have a vested interest in keeping it alive. He warned that they may try to stymie government reform initiatives in the sector. “There are cronies doing this business, also many armed groups that deal in this business ... It’s difficult to enforce the law.”

“[It’s] basically enemies becoming business partners,” said one observer of the timber industry in Kachin State, who asked not to be named. “Clearly to get logs from Sagaing into China, there has to be a collusion of interests on both the government and KIO side for that to happen, and it’s also very clear that the KIO is taxing the timber trade through their controlled checkpoints on the road.

“[But] according to local informants the timber seems to be very much predominantly coming from Myanmar-controlled areas.”

The Ministry of Environmental Conservation and Forestry could not be reached for comment, while senior KIA official General Gun Maw declined to comment last week.

In an interview with The Irrawaddy in February, however, he conceded that there were people “who benefit from this trade on both sides”.

“Instead of blaming each other, we mainly have to find a way to solve the issue of illegal logging,” he said.

The ban on raw timber exports was announced by the government in late 2012. It argued that the ban was necessary to preserve what is left of Myanmar’s natural forests, while at the same time creating jobs and generating higher export revenues by sawing timber before it is exported.