Two People Killed in Panama in Logging Dispute

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by Louisa Reynolds

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A bitter dispute that broke out on April 30 in the village of Platanal, in the eastern district of Chimán, between loggers and the indigenous Wounaan community left two people dead: indigenous leader or cacique Aquilino Opúa and tractor driver Ezequiel Batista. Three members of the Wounaan community were also injured.

The conflict arose when Wounaan villagers tried to burn the equipment used by loggers in an attempt to stop them from extracting cocobolo wood, a Central American tropical hardwood that is orange or reddish-brown in color, often with a series of darker irregular traces.

Cocobolo is used to make gun grips, knife handles, pool cues, police batons, brush backs, and musical instruments, such as guitars, drums, and basses, as it has been found to have acoustic properties.

The species is sought after by timber companies as it is exported at a high price to China and other Asian countries—where it is used by furniture manufacturers—even though it faces extinction. Cocobolo wood can be sold for US$20-US$30 per cubic foot.

After the use of ivory became illegal, cocobolo became highly sought after in Asian countries as a substitute. "An ornament made from cocobolo wood is a luxury," says Jorge Matsufuji of the Shinmatsu Foundation, a local environmental organization.

Eyewitness accounts said Wounaan leader Opúa was shot by tractor driver Batista. Despite the gravity of his injuries, Opúa still managed to embark on an hour-long walk back to his village where he died. Furious villagers then set off for the place where their cacique had been shot and attacked the loggers, killing Batista. At least three members of the Wounaan community were injured during the fight.

The police launched an investigation into the circumstances that led to these deaths, and Interior Vice Minister Javier Tejeira said, "I think there is frustration on both sides. The colonizers had the right to be there as they had obtained the necessary permit, but on the other hand the Wounaan feel that their rights are being infringed as the rightful owners of that land."

Before this incident, Wounaan leaders had given the Panamanian government an ultimatum and said that they should be granted land titles in compliance with the country’s laws as well as International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169 on the rights of indigenous and tribal people, that all nonindigenous colonizers should be expelled, and that logging in the area should cease immediately.

"We demand that the government evict all colonizers from our lands, and we will hold them responsible for anything that might occur as we are willing to shed our blood to defend our lands," said Edilberto Dogirama, president of the Emberá-Wounaan National Congress, weeks before the incident.
The government had purportedly complied and was no longer issuing logging permits. The authorities also claimed that all loggers operating in the area had been evicted. However, it appears that one company did not comply with this order, arguing that it had a government permit.

Alina Itucama, spokesperson for the Wounaan Congress, has blamed the Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente (ANAM) for failing to enforce a resolution approved in April 2011, which forbids the extraction of cocobolo wood. Although this activity is illegal, the loggers involved in the confrontation had a government permit that allowed them to work in the area.

**Environmentalists call for end to logging permits**

Alida Spadafora, director of the Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza (ANCON), called for the Panamanian authorities to suspend all logging permits and establish a forest moratorium until it can come up with adequate control mechanisms and prevent the extraction of endangered species.

Spadafora said the Chimán incident clearly illustrates weaknesses and loopholes in the government's enforcement mechanisms. "We propose the elimination of any logging permits and the establishment of urgent measures to safeguard the cocobolo species," she said.

The permits issued were known as permisos de subsistencia (subsistence permits) and were meant to be used by area inhabitants to build shacks. However, indigenous communities and environmental groups have pointed out that they are often misused by companies intent on exporting cocobolo and other wood species to Asian countries.

"There are no effective mechanisms for the authorities to implement the law and allow the sustainable use of these resources," said Spadafora. Other species that currently face extinction as a result of environmentally unsound logging practices include mahogany and eucalyptus.

The only exception that this moratorium would allow would be in the forests where sustainable management of resources has been proven.

Spadafora said that for years ANCON has reported illegal logging in the forest areas in eastern Panama, between Bayano and the Darién National Park, where regulations are not complied with, the police do not investigate environmental crimes, and ANAM officials who try to enforce compliance have been threatened by loggers.

ANCON has also warned that logging leads to deforestation, drought, and the loss of biodiversity, which will only sink local communities even further into poverty.

World Wildlife Fund (WWF) representative Carlos Espinosa added that the problem is that the current permit system has many loopholes and that ANAM is too lax and does not enforce compliance with existing regulations.

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