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Deborah Tyroler

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Guatemala: Timber Theft In El Peten

by Deborah Tyroler

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On April 2, Attorney General Acisclo Valladares told reporters that he had ordered the arrest of five former officials involved in timber theft in El Peten department. The five are former El Peten governor Abraham Fion Lizo; Ramon Alonzo Salazar and Felipe Vega de Leon, officials who worked for department government's promotions and economic development agency (FIDEP); Carlos Arturo del Valle; and, Cesar Monterroso, head of licensing and reforestation under the Forestry and Wildlife Administration (DIGEBOS). Valladares asserted that if investigations proved that these "big fish" were involved in timber theft, they would be prosecuted. Antoni Ferrati, coordinator of the National Environmental Commission (CONAMA), said that \$2 million worth of stolen timber had been recovered. Ferrati estimated that over 4,000 sections of a variety of exotic woods had been cut from a 40 sq.km. area in El Peten. Notimex reported on March 20 that Guatemalan Treasury Police arrested 60 Mexicans and four Guatemalans involved in timber theft. The police seized 700 felled trees, 3,500 cedar and mahogany lumber sections, two tractors, nine trucks, 13 chain-saws, one shotgun and two 22-calibre rifles. On March 24, ACAN-EFE reported that Treasury Police spokespersons told journalists that 120 undocumented Mexicans and one Guatemalan had been arrested for timber theft, and that a large cache of lumber was confiscated. According to the report, the poachers had established four camps to process timber. Agriculture Minister Adolfo Boppel told reporters in early April that he planned to request assistance from the US Agency for International Development (AID). Boppel said aerial photographs of the El Peten forests by the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) would be very useful in attempts to monitor deforestation. El Peten is Guatemala's largest and most isolated department. Tropical forests in the area contain ancient Mayan ruins and pyramids, making it a major tourist attraction. National legislator Guillermo Pellecer Robles recently requested that President Jorge Serrano demand that the Mexican government pay for natural resource losses, and destruction of archeological sites in El Peten. On April 7, Defense Minister Gen. Luis Mendoza said that the army would increase surveillance of areas along the Mexican border to prevent contraband of all kinds, including timber. (Basic data from AFP, 04/03/91; Notimex, 04/02/91; ACAN-EFE, 03/24/91, 04/07/91)

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