

(Unofficial translation of speech delivered in French, courtesy of GTZ)

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

**Ministry of Environment,
Nature Conservation and Tourism**



CLOSING ADDRESS AT THE WORKSHOP
ON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POST-PROCESS
CONVERSION OF FOREST TITLES IN THE DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Hotel Memling, Kinshasa, 4 to 6 March 2009

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Mr Deputy,

Provincial Ministers,

Mr Secretary General of Environment and Nature Conservation,

Mr Facilitator from the Congo Basin Forest Partnership,

Mr President of the Interafrican Forest Industries Association,

Ladies and gentlemen representing development partners,

Ladies and gentlemen the economic agents,

Ladies and gentlemen representing non-governmental organisations,

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have reached the end of the Workshop on implementation of the post-process conversion of forest titles in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

I would first like to thank all those who have spent the past three days concentrating on the subjects on the table and formulating pertinent recommendations for the next step in the process.

Before getting down to the essentials, namely the conclusions reached at the workshop and the way ahead, there is something I need to clarify. Friendship, it is said, nourishes truth. It is therefore in friendship that I take up this point.

I have noted a number of recent declarations and communiqués by certain NGOs questioning the Government's decisions, in particular in the forestry sector.

I would remind those NGOs that the Congolese people elected their representatives, that the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a

sovereign State and that it is for the Government of the Republic, not the NGOs, to define and conduct national policy. Those NGOs must understand that such excessive behaviour is not at all in our national interest.

As concerns the legal review of titles, I wish to renew my congratulations to the Interministerial Commission, which has fully discharged the mandate conferred on it by the Government: it submitted, with the outcome of its deliberations, specific observations on certain titles whose holders were noteworthy for the size of their investments, the number of local workers employed and the visibility of their economic and social achievements, but to which it could not give a favourable recommendation because they failed to meet one of the criteria of the legal review as defined in Decree No. 05/116 of October 2005. Everyone here knows that I deliberately and absolutely refrained from making any representations to the Commission.

As the Commission was established by the Government, it was therefore absolutely natural that the Government should be informed of the outcome of its work, examine outstanding problems and draw its own conclusions. I recall in passing, and for the particular attention of certain members of national civil society that appear to be unaware of the severity of the current economic crisis, that my colleague, the Minister for Employment, has received requests from timber companies for authorisation to dismiss massive numbers of workers.

Can a responsible government, in a country in which every job is worth its weight in gold, allow itself to sacrifice existing jobs without at least thinking about alternative strategies?

For the Government, employment is a priority in the DRC, as it is in Europe and the United States. Indeed, the governments of those

countries are presently providing substantial support to the economic sectors especially hard hit by the crisis - banking, the automobile industry, construction - without anyone complaining. Why should such measures, which are intended to rescue companies experiencing major economic difficulties and thereby save jobs and which receive broad support in most industrialised countries, be condemned in the DRC? Why should this be the only country in the world not entitled to review the mechanisms that make its economy work?

How can we accept pointless, groundless denunciations when we have not even started to answer the questions? It was the Government that ordered the legal review. That review has now been performed and the Government will meet the consequences. Should this stop it from asking the questions that need to be asked?

For example, is it acceptable that in such a sensitive sector, one that is so close to the people, fewer than 15% of titles should be held by nationals? What harm is there in asking the question? The DRC is constantly being criticised for laying contracts open to doubt; how then can the idea be accepted that companies that have had an investment code for only three years should be denied them without the Government thinking about it?

You may have ready-made answers to these questions, but I do not, and that is why we have gathered here.

For example, our country's economy is not as vast and diversified as those of the industrialised nations. In those conditions, let those who call for the industrial timber companies to disappear tell us what other solution the DRC has at present and, above all, who would look out for the thousands of people who would lose their jobs - even though, as you say and as we know, most people are paid pitifully little - and for their families.

To those who refuse to acknowledge the extreme gravity and scope of the crisis, I say that the fact of receiving subsidies from external organisations is no reason to minimise the disastrous consequences of eliminating jobs and to turn our backs on the plight of our compatriots.

For some people, carbon funding schemes, in particular those relating to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD), are a silver bullet. I would remind them first that the current round of international negotiations concerns the post-2012 period and that we are still in 2009. Secondly, I invite them to give greater thought to their positions on forest policy, as these in fact only serve to undermine the DRC's position in the international negotiations being conducted in the context of the Climate Convention.

I would point out to them that a large forest country like Brazil has already received substantial funding from the international community: it has just been granted a loan of USD 1.3 billion by the World Bank, which describes it as a country with a 'crucial' ecosystem.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, on the other hand, whose policy to protect forest ecosystems has to date been much more principled, is still waiting to reap the fruit of its people's efforts to preserve its forests.

In this context, it is especially peculiar and even irresponsible for Congolese NGOs that claim to be fighting to reduce poverty and protect the environment to encourage external partners to exert pressure on the Congolese Government with a view to forcing it, with no significant offsetting consideration, to extend the moratorium on the attribution of new forest concessions.

I therefore invite national NGOs to review their positions and to realise that they are acting against the interests of their own country. I advise

them not always to be the blind propagandists of the theories put forward by their big international sisters, which have made it their business to adopt radical positions on all environmental issues.

I recall once again that the forest industry sector is far less important in our country than in the other timber-producing countries of the subregion: it accounts for less than 10% of the DRC's entire forest cover compared to almost 50% on average in the other countries of the Central African Forest Commission (COMIFAC). I also recall the relative weight of sustainable forest management issues in the DRC: for every cubic metre of wood felled by the forestry industry, about 10 cubic metres are chopped down, essentially by the informal sector, for use as lumber on the local market, and 100 cubic metres for use as firewood.

Those figures alone show that the NGOs often wage the wrong battle. I invite them to help us build new sustainable modes of managing forest resources and to focus their thoughts and efforts on the areas currently prey to all kinds of anarchic felling rather than to doggedly opposing concessions already involved in the forest management process that are soon to be certified and that, moreover, will work to specifications that take definitive account of the population's interests. In this connection, I would like to read you an insert I saw in the 21 February issue of *Elle*. The insert is titled 'Finding good wood', which is at the very least ambiguous. It reads, and I quote: 'Never buy exotic woods (teak, millettia). Buy solid FSC-certified timber from French and European forests'. The message completely ignores the fact, recalled by the President of the Interafrican Forest Industry Association (IFIA) two days ago in this very room, that several million hectares of central African forests have already obtained FSC certification.

As part of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, we must all fight the temptation to boycott our products and our companies - yet another

reason why we cannot allow national NGOs to urge our development partners to stop helping the Government, which is tantamount to another form of boycott, as about thirty of them did in a recent press release when they invited the development partners 'not to make up the losses sustained because of taxes not paid by the forest industry'. I find it difficult to understand the reasoning behind such an unpatriotic step.

I will stop here and conclude on this point by inviting my compatriots who are active in environmental NGOs to adopt a more responsible, thought-out attitude towards the environmental and the socio-economic problems currently facing our country. I encourage them to have a more constructive view and draw nearer to the other partners already engaged in developing the forest and environmental sector, starting with the forest administration itself.

We should not leave ourselves open to attack by the mouthpieces of Afropessimism, a few insidious examples of which I have just given, whether in fashion magazines or in press releases.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I now turn to the much more constructive conclusions that are the outcome of your deliberations since Wednesday.

Pursuant to the final communiqué we just heard from the workshop rapporteur, I would like to start by remarking on the very high level of participation. This is a source of satisfaction. It shows that the issues you discussed in the past three days, namely (i) the terms and conditions for cancelling forest titles, (ii) monitoring the conversion process, (iii) the specifications, (iv) forest management and (v) the new concessions allocated and zoning, have received your undivided attention. I congratulate the organising team on the quality of the

meeting's technical and logistical preparations.

Generally speaking, I noted, in the communiqué we just heard, the many technical recommendations that will certainly be of great use to the teams in charge of following up the various components of the process.

Regarding the terms and conditions for cancelling titles still in dispute, I note that opinions remained divided. I will not re-open the debate: the Government will decide what has to be done and do it.

Regarding the recommendations relating to follow-up of the conversion process, I note the concern: (i) to harmonise the legal texts relating to forest control and to the payment and refunding of taxes linked to the forest industry; (ii) to simplify forest taxation; and (iii) to promote the process of legality and certification.

On the specifications, whose negotiation is a new exercise and one that is decidedly far from simple, I note with satisfaction that the composition of the working group was of a level commensurate with the issues involved. It issued many recommendations that opened new avenues. I note the need to redefine the roles and responsibilities of the State, the concession-holders and the people. The group underscored, quite rightly, the importance of properly assessing the various levels of negotiation in time and in space. Lastly, I note the interesting proposal, which has the advantage of being simple, to establish a fund using the amounts retroceded by unit of volume exploited. A similar funding mechanism is already in use in several countries in the subregion. The thoughts expressed on the matter do not seem complete to me, however, and I invite you to continue your reflections together in the weeks to come.

Lastly, regarding forest management operations, the attribution of new

concessions and zoning, I observe that the group presented a detailed overview of what has been accomplished and what remains to be done, gave indications on how to do it and proposed a road map. All these technical elements should enable us to pick up the momentum for sustainable management of our forest resources and to make rapid significant progress.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before concluding, I would like to thank the representatives of the Facilitation of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership and our friends from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH for the various forms of support they gave us.

I wish the experts who took part in the workshop a well-deserved weekend of rest after all their hard work and a safe journey back home to those who will be leaving Kinshasa. I declare the work of the Workshop on implementation of the post-process conversion of forest titles in the Democratic Republic of the Congo closed.

Long live subregional and international cooperation!

Long live the Democratic Republic of the Congo!

Thank you.