

The Herald

EU's cheap furniture comes from illegally felled wood

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Vast areas of forest are being illegally felled to fuel a demand for cheap furniture in the West, according to environment watchdogs.

Vietnam is taking huge quantities of wood from neighbouring Laos for markets in Europe and the United States.

The British-based Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) estimates 500,000 cubic metres of logs a year were smuggled over the frontier using false documents and bribes.

The group said Thai businesses were also buying illegally cut wood from Laos.

"The cost of such unfettered greed is borne by poor rural communities in Laos who are dependent on the forests for their traditional livelihoods," a spokesman said.

"The ultimate responsibility for his dire state of affairs rests with the consumer markets which import wood products made from stolen timber."

The EIA said laws now before the US Congress would curb such imports and the EU was taking steps to certify furniture and other forest products as having come from legally procured timber.

The group said Vietnam had taken steps to conserve its own forests while at the same time expanding its wooden furniture production, much of it with illegal timber.

Furniture exports from Vietnam totalled £1.2bn last year, a tenfold increase since 2000. The Vietnamese government says 39% of the exports in 2006 went to the US, 14% to Japan, 7% to the UK and 4% each to France and Germany.

"The plundering of Laos's forests involves high-level corruption and bribery and it is not just Vietnam, which is exploiting its neighbour. Thai and Singapore traders are also cashing in," the report said.

Posing as investors, EIA staffers met a Thai businessman who bragged of paying bribes to senior Lao military officials to secure wood potentially worth £250m.

Meanwhile, Friends of the Earth said yesterday it had discovered illegal wood was used in four EU construction projects. The group said wood from the Amazon, and other places where large-scale and often illegal logging takes place, was used in projects financed by the EU.

The European Commission has acknowledged about 1000 square metres of illegal Indonesian plywood was used to renovate the top floor of its headquarters, where President Jose Manuel Barroso has his offices.-AP

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