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Forest management group strips Vietnamese rubber company of certification



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A global forest management organization has stripped a Vietnamese rubber company of

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violations and illegally destroyed thousands of acres of forest for rubber plantations in Cambodia.

The US-based Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), an international nonprofit organization that promotes responsible management of the world's forests, publicly announced the decision Monday after finding evidence that Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG) had illegally seized land from local villagers in Cambodia and decimated at least 50,000 hectares (123,600 acres) of forest, including wildlife sanctuaries and protected areas, for its plantations.



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“The FSC investigation provides further evidence that VRG has destroyed some of South East Asia's most important remaining forests, with indigenous communities forcibly displaced in the process, and is forcibly taking land from its rightful owners and destroying livelihoods — with untold and irreversible effects,” said Patrick Alley, a founding director of Global Witness, in a news release.

He added that the FSC had “done the right thing” by dropping VRG, whose land concessions in Cambodia cover about 100,000 hectares (247,100 acres), from its certification scheme, and urged the state-owned company to take action to address the damage it had caused.

The FSC conducted a five-month investigation of VRG after the London-based environmental advocacy group Global Witness filed a complaint last year, alleging that the company's rubber plantations in Cambodia and Laos had detrimentally affected the environment and livelihoods of local communities.

The FSC complaints panel, which was set up on Dec. 8, 2014, found evidence that VRG's subsidiaries in Cambodia were taking indigenous peoples' land without their consent and illegally clearing intact forest containing internationally protected wood species, such as rosewood, inside and outside their concession boundaries.

The panel decided to repeal the company's certification two months ago, after concluding that VRG and its Cambodian subsidiaries ignored indigenous land claims, let illegal loggers inside concession areas, and allowed government-backed military police to threaten protesters.

The company also destroyed thousands of acres of the world's most valuable forest without

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The panel also accused the Cambodian government of failing to implement and enforce its own laws on community land rights and forest protection. As evidence, it said that the government had handed over more than 2 million hectares (4.9 million acres) of land without the knowledge or consent of those living on it, creating land conflicts.

“The Cambodian land sector operates behind a wall of secrecy,” Alley said, with high levels of corruption in the form of bribes paid by investors to access land.

“The result of this is not just environmental destruction and human rights abuses, but ongoing and often violent conflicts over land,” he said.

Sao Sopheap, spokesman of Cambodia’s Ministry of Environment, rejected the FSC’s findings, saying that the government had resolved the land concessions issues and correctly implemented the relevant law.

“In general, we implement the laws and regulations stated in Cambodia to manage land concessions [here], so regardless of whether it’s a Vietnamese, European or Chinese land concession company, we will enforce the same laws,” he told RFA’s Khmer Service.

“If any company does not comply with the law or provokes problems with villagers, communities or indigenous villagers, we will take the same measures against them,” he said.

Complaint resolution mechanism

To regain certification, VRG must compensate communities in Cambodia for the land and resin trees it took, conduct thorough environmental impact assessments, and restore forest areas, the FSC’s complaints panel said.

Last August, two months after the panel shared its findings and recommendations with the parties involved, VRG announced that would accept and review complaints from people affected by its plantations.

But so far, VRG has not adequately addressed specific complaints through its grievance mechanism, the FSC said.

“The Vietnam Rubber Group needs to make good on its apparent commitment to resolving the widely reported harmful impacts of its operations, not only in Cambodia but

also in neighboring Laos.” Alley said.

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days.

This is not the first time that VRG has lost its certification from the FSC.

The FSC suspended the company in November 2013 because of accusations that it had grabbed land from villagers in Laos and Cambodia, but reinstated it in September 2014.

The move drew criticism from Global Witness, which in May 2013 issued a report on VRG and another Vietnamese company, Hoang Anh Gia Lai, whose plantations in both countries had negatively impacted local communities and the environment.

The group pointed out that VRG had signed deals with the Lao and Cambodian governments to lease vast tracts of land without getting permission from those who lived in the areas or compensating them for their land.

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