



As profits from Liberian timber were used to buy arms, the United Nations banned their export. After sanctions were introduced, logs like these were simply abandoned. The Monrovia Declaration, if put into practice, will usher in a new era of sustainable forest management. (Photo by Yemi Katarere)

Tackling forest conflict



Liberia is one of many forested countries which have experienced violent conflict. The civil war is now over, and UN forces help to keep the peace. (Photo by UN Photo/Eric Kanalstein)

Over the past 20 years, some 30 armed conflicts have occurred in and around forested areas. Civil wars in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Myanmar, Nepal and Rwanda – to name but a few of the better-known conflicts – have led to the displacement and death of forest-dwelling people on a massive scale. Other conflicts, such as those in Suriname and the Solomon Islands, have scarcely troubled the headline writers, but they have still caused considerable suffering and disruption.

The relationship between forests and conflict was one of the key themes of FAO's *State of the World's Forests* report for 2005. 'Forestry people need to recognise the importance of this issue, because their behaviour can make things either worse or better,' explains CIFOR Director General David Kaimowitz, who contributed the chapter on 'Forests and war, forests and peace.' 'And people working outside the forestry sector also need to pay more attention to this issue, because forests, for one reason or another, are frequently linked to violent conflict.'

As FAO's Assistant Director General of Forestry, Hosny El-Lakany, points out, forests often make the ideal setting for war. 'It's in the forest that one often finds poor, isolated populations who are either ignored or mistreated, and they often need little encouragement to take up arms,' he

says. Forests often contain valuable timber, minerals and other resources which people are prepared to fight over. Besides which, forests also provide the perfect refuge for those engaged in an armed struggle.

The report suggests that governments need to take bold steps to recognise the rights of ethnic minorities and others living in forested regions, before their grievances lead to conflict. Forest-dependent people also need to be better integrated into the wider economy. Kaimowitz believes that when wars do break out, forest issues can offer a path to peace. He cites the case of Colombia. There, forestry and environmental issues featured prominently in the peace talks between the government and rebel forces, although the negotiations ultimately broke down.

These issues were explored in greater depth in a special issue published by the European Tropical Forest Research Network (ETFRN) and guest-edited by Kaimowitz. There was so much material that ETFRN decided to make it a double issue, and such was the interest generated that extra copies had to be printed. 'It has now become clear to us that this is an issue that requires a lot more attention,' explains ETFRN coordinator Willemine Brinkman. She believes that CIFOR, through the work of Kaimowitz, has been a key player in raising awareness about the issue.