

New illegal logging threatens Liberia's forests amid vague ban

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Kpokolo seized at the Klay Checkpoint, Bomi, Liberia. Image courtesy James Harding Giahyue/The Daylight.

- *Large-scale commercial operators are evading Liberian forestry regulations by illegally processing wood destined for export on-site in forests.*
- *Timber milled in forests with chainsaws is legally restricted to the production of boards by artisanal loggers for sale on the domestic market, but reporting by Liberian newspaper *The Daylight* and research by U.S.-based NGO *Forest Trends* has found large-scale operators producing thicker blocks of high-value wood for export.*
- *Chainsaw-milled timber isn't entered into the country's timber-tracking system, meaning producers can evade sustainable forestry regulations as well as taxes and benefits due to local communities.*
- *The country's Forestry Development Authority says it has banned production of this type of timber, but campaigners say it has done little to publicize the ban or prevent traffickers from exploiting this loophole.*

MONROVIA — Chainsaw-milled timber is emerging as a damaging new form of illegal logging in Liberia. Chainsaw milling is legally permitted only for small-scale production of boards for the country’s domestic market, but larger operators may be using it as a means to evade regulations governing the sourcing and tracing of wood, and to avoid paying royalties to communities.

Liberia has the largest intact forests in West Africa, a reservoir for biodiversity and a vital resource for the people who live in them. During the long civil war that began in the 1990s, armed factions indiscriminately felled large areas for valuable timber to pay their fighters and enrich their leaders. Establishing effective regulation of the timber industry was an important part of the peace process negotiated in the mid-2000s.

In the postwar period, Liberia set up a system meant to ensure that wood is sustainably harvested only from licensed concessions, and volumes of timber are properly accounted for to ensure the state and local communities get their share of the taxes and royalties. The time, place, and date of every tree harvested commercially is meant to be recorded in the LiberTrace tracking system. Raw, round logs are exported to foreign markets, mainly to European Union countries, China and Vietnam.

Chainsaw milling is an exception. Currently, small-scale operators are allowed to reach informal agreements with local communities to fell trees and cut them into boards. The timber they produce is solely for sale in Liberia’s domestic markets and meant to be no thicker than 2 inches (5 centimeters).



(Left) Kpokolo stacked in a container in Lofa County in 2019. Image courtesy Civil Society-led Independent Forest Monitoring; (right) kpokolo in a forest clearing in Gbarpolu County, Liberia in 2022. Image courtesy The Daylight.

Kpokolo

“Block wood” or kpokolo, meaning “thick and heavy” in the local Kpelle language, is also processed on-site in the forest, but it differs sharply in size and class from timber destined for local use. Kpokolo timber is typically thicker than the 2-inch maximum for legal chainsaw milling, sometimes up to 10 times more. The blocks of timber are squared to fit neatly into containers for export.

These loggers target expensive, durable hardwoods like ekki (*Lophira alata*), iroko (*Milicia spp.*) and bilinga (*Nauclea diderrichii*) — species listed by the IUCN as threatened and used for everything from shipbuilding and making musical instruments to outdoor construction and veneer. In one instance, researchers heard that kpokolo were exported for use as railroad ties in Ukraine before the Russian invasion.

Initially, kpokolo was produced on a small scale by illicit chainsaw millers, including migrant workers from other parts of West Africa, with the help of local farmers, chiefs and officials. But investigative reporting by Liberian journalists and a new report by U.S.-based environmental NGO [Forest Trends](#) shows that [larger logging companies are now active in the subsector](#), bypassing the timber tracking system and undermining Liberia’s efforts to protect and manage its forests.

“Kpokolo subverts the legal process for exporting timber from Liberia, including evading taxes and benefits-sharing payments to the communities most affected by industrial logging,” said report co-author Arthur Blundell. “The illegal exploitation takes advantages of weaknesses in enforcement, corrupting officials and compromising processes.”

For the report, a follow-up to [a 2016 study of the country’s timber market](#), Forest Trends interviewed 267 people across eight of Liberia’s 15 counties over a two-month period in 2022.

“The results of this survey are not sufficient to show systematic information on kpokolo from which conclusions can be drawn about its scale across Liberia,” the authors wrote, “but results do uncover sufficient cases to suggest the threat is real and significant.”

A single chainsaw operator in Gbarpolu county reported producing 2,200 planks and 900 blocks of kpokolo in a single month. He estimated that he produced 2,500 kpokolo over the course of a year. Two timber operators interviewed by Forest Trends said a Turkish company in Nimba county was using a mobile sawmill in forests there. A chainsaw operator and forest monitor belonging to the Liberia Chainsaw and Timber Dealers Union (LICSATDUN) told the researchers, “The company is using mobile saw that clears large portion of bush and trees in seconds.”



Planks for sale in Monrovia in 2013: small-scale operators are allowed to fell trees and cut them into boards for sale in Liberia's domestic markets. This exception is increasingly being exploited to export large blocks of high-value hardwood without entering them into the country's timber-tracking system, evading sustainable forestry regulations as well as taxes and benefits due to local communities. Image by Flore de Preneuf/PROFOR via [Flickr](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Political will

Traders and producers say kpokolo has been produced in Liberia for at least 20 years. However, Liberia's Forestry Development Authority (FDA) only acted against production and transport of block wood in 2022, after [local media published a series of stories about the illegal trade](#).

Responding to [questions posed by The Daylight newspaper about this illegal timber in February 2023](#), Edward Kamara, an FDA official who oversees chainsaw milling, said the authority took steps following the seizure of several consignments of kpokolo bound for export. Kamara said the FDA had issued "tens" of permits for kpokolo production for local use, but these were being abused.

"We have ordered all our checkpoint staff members to stop the issuance of waybills for all sawn timbers with a thickness above two inches because this is the dimensional range of thickness that is prone to illegal exportation," Kamara told the newspaper.

There's evidence suggesting that some FDA officials are complicit in the kpokolo trade. In 2021, Mike Doryen, the managing director of the FDA, [issued a permit to a kpokolo company](#) outside the legal system. The newspaper that broke that story also published documents in other investigations, revealing [FDA](#)

rangers collected a fee from kpokolo traders under Doryen’s instructions. There’s no public record that those payments went into the government’s coffers.

Doryen has denied any involvement with kpokolo, saying the media reports are “paid journalism deployed by our detractors to paint the FDA ugly in the eyes of the public.”



A mobile mill: the illegal export of kpokolo is undermining the sound management of Liberia’s forests and denying local communities and artisanal loggers of their due economic benefits, an integral part of Liberia’s postwar forestry reform, says Forest Trends. Image courtesy Gerald C Koinyeneh/TheDaylight.

Half-hearted prevention

Nearly a year after Kamara’s comments, the FDA hasn’t officially published a ban on kpokolo. Other than a mention of it at a forestry meeting in June last year, there’s been no public document or statement announcing the ban, and the authority didn’t respond to Mongabay’s queries for comment.

David Young, another of the Forest Trend report authors, told Mongabay this indicates a lack of resolve on the part of the FDA. “One email to a Liberian media outlet or one statement by [the Ministry of Justice] to an intergovernmental meeting is far from sufficient to reach the target audience,” he told Mongabay, referencing the email to the newspaper in which the FDA spoke of the ban and the June meeting.

“Any statement needs to explain exactly what is being banned and why. Otherwise, it will be open to challenge, either by people arguing they didn’t know [kpokolo] was banned, or by outright legal challenge,”

Young added.

The FDA's action against kpokolo traffickers seems to bear this out. Since last February, the authority has seized several consignments of kpokolo, arrested a number of alleged Turkish traffickers in possession of block wood, blacklisted their company, and requested the public to come forward with information on kpokolo.

But no attempts have been made to auction the seized wood as mandated by law, and the case against the alleged traffickers hasn't moved forward. The FDA also took no action against an official in the Ministry of Commerce who issued the Turks with an illegal export permit.

In a statement blacklisting the Turkish company, the FDA claimed said it had only issued the Turks with a license to operate a sawmill, not to conduct logging. However, according to a 2019 USAID report, the FDA approved an agreement between the Turkish loggers and a local community to harvest timber in northeastern Liberia. There's no record of that agreement in industry reports for that period, including those of the Liberia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiatives (LEITI).

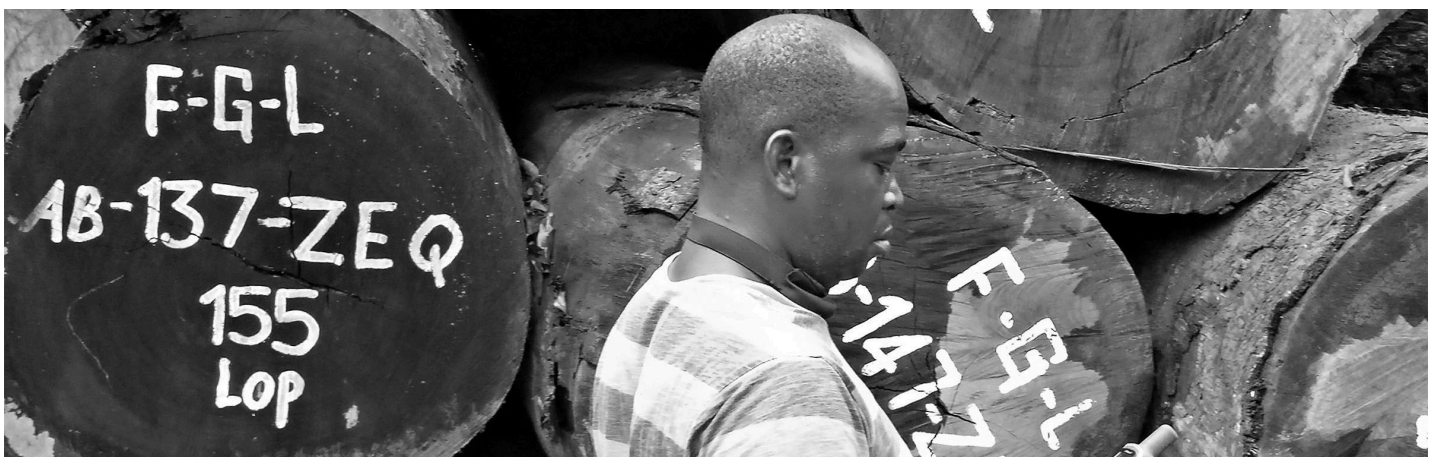
Forest Trends says kpokolo is undermining the sound management of Liberia's forests and denying local communities and artisanal loggers of their due economic benefits, an integral part of Liberia's postwar forestry reform. The NGO backs chainsaw millers pushing for enforcement of a new regulation to help limit the kpokolo trade.

"What we need is the political will," said Julius Kamara (no relation to Edward Kamara), the president of LICSATDUN, the loggers' union. "We want that regulation."

Forest Trends has also called on Liberian president-elect Joseph Boakai, who took office on Jan. 22, to ensure that a detailed ban on kpokolo is published.

"The ban must be followed by a clear demonstration of enforcement. Improving legal control should be a top priority for President-elect Boakai, or Liberia's citizens and the global climate will suffer," Kerstin Canby, Forest Trends' senior director, said in a statement.

"If the ban is not carefully detailed and widely disseminated, it is unlikely to be effective in the face of powerful business forces involved."



Liberia loggers felling trees outside concession as government stands by

MONROVIA, Liberia — Civil society groups say logging companies are exploiting weak monitoring and enforcement of Liberia's forestry laws. A new briefing highlights the illegal harvest of as much as 14,000 cubic meters (494,000 cubic feet) of timber in Grand Bassa county; despite knowing about the case for more than two years, the authorities have ... Continue reading

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Banner image: Kpokolo seized at the Klay Checkpoint, Bomi, Liberia. Image courtesy James Harding Giahvue/The Daylight.

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