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CRIME

Follow the money to catch illegal loggers

Deborah Zabarenko
REUTERS/WASHINGTON

The same follow-the-money approach used to catch drug kingpins and human traffickers could be used to track down the big operators behind large-scale illegal logging, the World Bank said on Tuesday.

Around the world, illegal loggers cut down an area of forest the size of a football field every two seconds, generating criminal proceeds of between US$10 billion and $15 billion annually, the Bank said in a report.

"You have a crime, it's generating proceeds, and one way to enlarge your toolkit is to follow the money," said Jean Pesne, manager of the Bank's Financial Market Integrity unit, which released the report, "Justice for Forests".

Deforestation of protected land may be done to harvest old-growth trees and exotic woods or to clear land for large-scale agriculture or cattle grazing. But it can lead to soil erosion and cuts down on trees' ability to lock up climate-warming carbon dioxide.

The report, which does not differentiate between the reasons for tree-cutting, advocates the use of financial tools more familiar in the pursuit of organized criminals to combat illegal deforestation.

The full range of crime-fighting tools should be used to catch illegal logging organizations, rather than the low-level operators who cut down the trees. These tools include electronic surveillance, undercover operations and witness protection, according to the report.

Preventive measures have been tried to curb illegal logging, but have been "without significant impact", the report said.

"Use money as both intelligence and evidence," Pesne said by telephone. "What are these criminal organizations, how are they structured, and what are the intermediaries who are interfering with their work? ...

"These are sophisticated tools that are better suited to go after the big fish."

Any intermediaries would have to be paid at some point, making them the beneficiaries of a crime, and law enforcement officials could follow the flow of dirty money from the criminal organization to corrupt officials, Pesne said.

Most countries where illegal logging takes place have laws in place to track these funds, but making them work requires cooperation from the private sector, especially financial institutions obligated to report suspicious transactions, the report said.

These techniques would probably be most effective in more sophisticated countries with a strong judiciary and the ability to train financial investigators, Pesne said.

Indonesia and Brazil, both countries with substantial illegal logging, have started moving to probe the big players in those criminal enterprises, he said.