

Greece is latest gateway for rape of Africa's rainforests

BY DANIEL HOWDEN
in Athens

GREEN CAMPAIGNERS are accusing a Greek flooring company of contributing to the destruction of ancient rainforests by being one of the gateways into the European Union for imports of west African timber.

Greenpeace activists boarded the MV *Zini*, which is owned by Shelman, in the port of Kalamaki, near Corinth, on 15 April and found logs that they claimed were loaded in the Liberian port of Buchanan.

Buchanan is controlled by the controversial Oriental Timber Company (OTC), accused in a report to the United Nations of corruption, illegal logging and participation in the cross-border arms trade that has fuelled the civil war in neighbouring Sierra Leone.

Nikos Charalambides, director of Greenpeace Greece, said: "Greek imports of Liberian wood from ancient forests have increased approximately 10-fold in the last few years."

Since the United Nations



Greenpeace claims Liberia's ancient rainforests will be gone in six years if logging continues at the present rate

sanctions were imposed on the Liberian diamond trade in an effort to choke arms supplies to the Sierra Leone rebels, President Kenneth Taylor's government has turned to the liquidation of the rainforest in search of a cash crop to buy weapons.

Phil Aikman, of Greenpeace, said: "Each year hundreds of thousands of cubic metres of Liberia's remaining forest is exported by logging companies

... The ancient forest is being destroyed. At the present rate it will be gone completely within six years."

The Liberian rainforests are among the last strongholds for forest elephants and the Pygmy hippopotamus and harbour species only found in Liberia as well as many more close to extinction elsewhere.

A report by a panel of experts on timber trade in the area, for the UN Security Council,

recommended sanctions be extended to ban the export of logs - a move blocked by China and France, according to the British pressure group Global Witness.

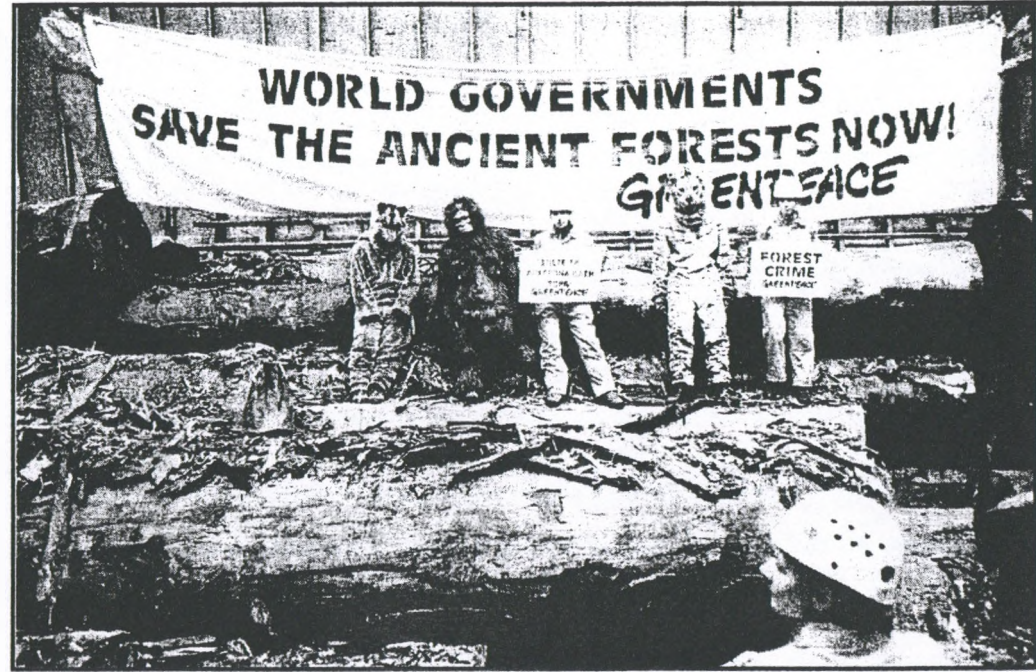
Shelman supplies timber for exotic hardwood floors to customers all over the European Union and the United States, claiming on its website to be the "biggest importer of West African wood in the world".

The company denies knowingly buying from OTC, but refused to comment on the latest allegations when contacted by *The Independent*.

Mr Charalambides said: "At first they told us they have their own man who selects every trunk and then they insisted that it is all handled by middle men at the markets."

"It is time for the Greek government to clean up this destructive timber trade and seize the opportunity to take decisive action."

Greenpeace says that only one-fifth of the original forests remain and that logging is the single largest threat to those still remaining.



Greenpeace activists board the MV 'Zini' in the Greek port of Kalamaki to protest against illegal logging