

# The timber mafia

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In 1947, cedar, maple, ash, pine, fir, oak, spruce and walnut trees covered at least 42 percent of Kashmir. Up in the forests of high mountains was an undisturbed snow leopard population. Back in 1947, the majestic Hangul, the rare red deer grazed in huge herds. In the midst of all the cedar and pine, was the Himalayan black bear, markhor, striped hyena, lynx, and bex. The woods were full of colorful pheasants, the blood pheasant, the iridescent monal pheasant, the crimson tragopan, and the koklass pheasant. Way above the tree line flew the golden eagle and the bearded vulture. The jungles were always live with marmoset whistles and the buzz of bees.

The timber mafia has cut the jungles down. Less than 11 percent of Kashmir remains forested. The snow leopard, having lost his habitat, is now an endangered species. The Kashmiri stag, Hangul, is now one of the most endangered species. The Pakistani straight-horned markhor is an endangered species. Migratory birds from Siberia have stopped visiting Kashmir.

Poachers and hunters have done their bit. Cross-border bombardment also played its role (shelling kills living

tissues of trees). To be certain, the timber mafia has been ahead of them all (there is a complete ban on the cutting of green trees by the Azad Jammu and Kashmir cabinet).

The rest of Pakistan is far worse off than is Kashmir. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United States (FAO), Pakistan's total forested area stands at 2.3 million hectares, a mere 3.1 percent of our total land area. Consider this: more than 33 percent of the US is forested; 46 percent of Europe is forested; 50 percent of South America is forested; 17.8 percent of Asia is forested, and only 3.1 percent of Pakistan is forested. Pakistani forests are vanishing at an alarming rate. According to The World Conservation Union, "If the situation does not change soon they will disappear in 20 to 25 years."

In NWFP, a major illegal tree-felling operation by the timber mafia took place in 1988. The government should have seized the wood and penalised the illegal loggers. The timber mafia, however, was allowed to export it to other provinces. The timber mafia got away with 400,000 cubic feet of forest wood. Between 1989 and 1992, an additional



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million cubic feet was illegally logged.

Our timber mafia is creating new deserts, and deforestation is fast becoming our most serious environmental problem. Deforestation is causing soil erosion, mudslides and flooding. Ac-

operate: Cycle 1: Our timber mafia is deforesting us. Deforestation means dry soil and wind erosion. Wind erosion means airborne dust and that means all sorts of respiratory diseases. Cycle 2: Deforestation means greenhouse effect, eroding soil, causing floods, silts reservoirs, canals and dams. Cycle 3: Deforestation means global warming, changes in vegetation patterns, habitat loss, coastal erosion, tidal flooding and disruption of water

## The nuclear test sites, both in India and Pakistan, are now hard hit by drought. Inhabitants of villages around the actual test sites are becoming victims of the drought like never before

According to FAO, "When too many trees are cut, runoff and soil erosion increases at rates 20 to 40 times faster than soil can be stabilised, impairing water quality in streams and rivers and harming fish and aquatic species. As more land is degraded, it increases the likelihood of natural hazards, such as avalanches landslides and floods."

supply. Cycle 4: Deforestation causes species extinction, changes the ecosystem leading to mosquito-borne diseases. Cycle 5: Deforestation reduces groundwater recharge resulting in crop and herd losses with loss of income.

Here is how various vicious cycles

Intriguingly, the nuclear test sites, both in India and Pakistan, are now hard hit by drought. Inhabitants of villages around the actual test sites are be-

coming victims of the drought like never before.

According to a recent estimate, the "timber mafia in complicity with corrupt officials of the Forest Department has ..... chopped up 75,000 green trees worth Rs2 billion in Multan Circle during the last one and a half years (as per rules only dead, dry and fallen trees on canals and roads can be removed)." Drought and desertification now threaten the livelihood of at least 30 million Pakistanis, and that is every 2 Pakistanis out of 10.

Can anyone name the place in Pakistan that has the highest number of Mercedes cars (per capita) in Pakistan? Answer: Hazara. Incidentally, Hazara is also the heart of the timber mafia.

Trees give us oxygen. The timber mafia is taking away our oxygen. Trees help cool the land and bring in rainfall. The timber mafia is taking away our rain.

Just what is our government doing about our trees, our oxygen and our rainfall? Islamabad, once again, swore that the "timber mafia would be dealt with an iron hand and illegal cutting of forests would not be tolerated."