

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12:01 AM APRIL 24, 2006 (PST)

2006 Goldman Environmental Prize Recipient for Africa

Silas Kpanan'AYoung Siakor
Monrovia, Liberia



"Silas is the one, the civil society leader in Liberia working on the ground for communities, and at the high policy levels for forest reforms. Silas has shown incredible vision in his courageous work, often at the risk of his own life." - Michelle Medeiros, senior campaigner with Friends of the Earth International.

A Voice for the Forest and Its People

Silas Kpanan'AYoung Siakor, 36, exposed evidence that Liberia President Charles Taylor used the profits of unchecked, rampant logging to pay the costs of a brutal 14-year civil war that left 150,000 people dead. At great personal risk, Siakor collected extremely hard-to-get evidence of falsified logging records, illegal logging practices and associated human rights abuses. He passed the evidence to the United Nations Security Council, which then banned the export of Liberian timber, part of wider trade sanctions that remain in place today.

"The evidence Silas Siakor collected at great personal risk was vital to putting sanctions in place and cutting the links between the logging industry and conflict," said Arthur Blundell, chairman of the U.N. Panel of Experts on Liberia.

Since Taylor was ousted in 2003, Siakor has been working with Liberia's new leadership to create sustainable timber policies and give the local forest communities a voice through the first Forest People's Congress, which he organized. He also is working with the \$4 million Liberian Forest Initiative led by the U.S. State Department and the National Forest Service to support Liberia's forest reform efforts.

Siakor has urged the U.N. Security Council to maintain the sanctions until the corrupt logging companies that operated under the Taylor regime are removed, the forestry sector is reformed, and a workable forest management plan is in place.

Demonstrating the power of the sanctions and the evidence Siakor exposed, the first presidential order issued by new President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf cancelled all of Liberia's forest concessions. Johnson-Sirleaf, the first democratically elected female president in Africa, vowed that new forest use agreements will not be issued until a range of forest reforms has been carried out.

Plundering Liberia's Natural Resources

Liberia's forests cover 11.8 million acres, an area twice the size of Vermont, and include the last remaining closed-canopy tropical rainforest in the Upper Guinea Forests of West Africa. They are home to nearly half of Africa's mammal species, including the pygmy hippopotamus, Liberian mongoose and West Africa's largest forest elephant population.

When he was president, Taylor raided the valuable hardwood forests by entering into secret agreements with a favored lumber company and awarding it the largest logging concessions in the country. The company's private militia committed egregious human rights abuses including rape, beatings and indiscriminate destruction of entire villages.

Siakor worked amid this chaotic and dangerous environment to steadily document and disseminate evidence that would end the plundering of one of Liberia's greatest natural resources. Siakor hired observers at three ports, collecting information on 80 percent of logging exports. The observers found that the actual exports greatly exceeded official reports – and that arms shipments were being unloaded at the ports by timber company workers.

Planning a Sustainable Future

Siakor, the director of the Sustainable Development Institute, is coordinating civil society's participation in the forest sector reform, as mandated by the U.N. Security Council. Siakor organizes workshops and written proposals that outline forest sector reform priorities, emphasizing transparency, civil society input and sustainable forest management. His work led the interim government to protect 3.7 million acres of forest.

Despite his outstanding achievements to date, Siakor is still fighting powerful forces that want to tap into Liberia's forests as a source of income. The U.N. Security Council is under intense pressure from China, the new Liberian government and others to lift the timber sanctions.

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Recipient Quote:

Name in print: Silas Kpanan'AYoung Siakor

"Our struggle for the environment is not about trees. It is a campaign for social justice and respect for human rights. It is about our right to have a healthy and safe environment."

About the Goldman Environmental Prize

The Goldman Environmental Prize allows individuals to continue winning environmental victories against the odds and inspires ordinary people to take extraordinary actions to protect the world. The Goldman Environmental Prize was created in 1990 by civic leaders and philanthropists Richard N. Goldman and his late wife, Rhoda H. Goldman.

The Goldman Environmental Prize winners are selected by an international jury from confidential nominations submitted by a worldwide network of environmental organizations and individuals. Prize winners participate in a 10-day tour of San Francisco and Washington, D.C., for an awards ceremony and presentation, news conferences, media briefings, and meetings with political, public policy and environmental leaders.