

!Naruseb's efforts on timber questioned

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Page no: 1

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THE Namibian Chamber of Environment's chief executive officer, Chris Brown, has branded the efforts of agriculture and forestry minister Alpheus !Naruseb in curbing the ongoing plunder of timber in northern Namibia as "absolutely useless".

Namibian rosewood forests, especially in the Kavango regions, are being plundered and exported to benefit the Chinese furniture market.

Brown told *The Namibian* yesterday, unlike environment minister Pohamba Shifeta, who has publicly condemned the timber trade, !Naruseb preferred to work in the background, and wait for his officials to finish their investigations.

!Naruseb preferred that technocrats in his ministry speak on his behalf while there is a temporary ban on harvesting and

transporting timber.

To Brown, this is not good enough.

"We want to know what he [!Naruseb] has been up to. He has been useless," Brown charged. "The environment ministry saved the situation. This makes me wonder whether the forestry department at the ministry of agriculture should not be transferred to environment to conserve the remaining forests."

!Naruseb told *The Namibian* yesterday that he does not care about being called "useless".

"Well, that's their problem if they want to call another human being useless. I don't report to them, or do things to be rated by them," he said.

!Naruseb, who has in the past declined to provide public updates through the media, broke his silence yesterday when he insisted that the concerns over timber harvesting were being dealt with.

"We have sent ministerial officials to investigate the matter. They compiled a report that they sent to their respective executive directors," he explained, adding that executive directors will meet officials from trade; land reform; national planning; and environment ministries.

Those ministries will produce a report and submit it to prime minister Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila. The report will be discussed by ministers who will issue a joint statement.

"Only then will I be better-placed to make a pronouncement, based on facts," !Naruseb said.

NOT IMPRESSED

Brown slammed !Naruseb for failing to denounce the timber exploitation publicly in a statement two weeks ago issued on behalf of the environment pressure group.

"Despite claims by minister Alpheus !Naruseb of Agriculture, Water and Forestry that his ministry has been working quietly to address the problem, we see no evidence of this. Indeed, the opposite seems to apply – he and his ministry do not appear to have the will, commitment, ideas or capacity to close these loopholes and enforce relevant legislation to protect woodlands and hardwood trees in Namibia," Brown said.

The Directorate of Forestry mandated to control timber harvesting is severely underfunded and poorly supported, he added.

According to Brown, timber harvesting quotas have been issued without forestry field assessments.

"Transport and marketing permits for timber also seem to be routinely granted without any physical inspections by the Department of Forestry due to a lack of staff and transport," Brown stated.

The environmental body also warned that the current timber exploitation is being done under the smokescreen of clearing land

for agricultural use.

“The clearing of woodland for the Liselo green scheme created a cover for the company contracted to clear the woodland to harvest trees beyond the boundary of this scheme,” Brown said.

He added that forestry permits were also used to launder other timber harvested from the state forest and other areas.

“It has subsequently emerged that a far greater number of slow-growing hardwood trees, as many as 60 000, according to an estimate by the minister of environment and tourism, were illegally harvested in the area south of Rundu and west of Khaudum National Park, where small-scale farms were established,” Brown continued. The chief executive officer said in both instances, the agriculture and forestry ministry issued harvesting permits without environmental clearance certificates, as required by law.

“These timber harvesting companies were thus operating illegally,” he stressed.

Brown, an environmental scientist and ecologist, said woodlands are significant mitigators of climate change.

“Australia plans to plant a billion trees in the next 30 years to help mitigate the impact of climate change. Namibia is stripping its landscape of hardwood and other trees,” he said.

Brown questioned the government's double standards in seeking millions from international donors to fund its climate change projects, while stripping its own natural forests.

“Namibia is seeking funds from the Green Climate Fund for climate adaptation and mitigation. If Namibia is serious about addressing climate change impacts, then it needs to start at home with commitments towards protecting its climate mitigating ecosystems.

“It is cynical to expect the global community to support our climate change adaptation and mitigation plans if we do not have the political will to do something as simple as protecting our woodlands”.

Brown said Namibia's timber is being sold cheaply.

“Namibian harvesters are either just squaring the logs or cutting them into planks, thereby cynically “adding value” – but this adds no value to the timber, so we are effectively selling it raw,” he explained.

“As this industry is inherently unsustainable in Namibia, this situation equates to us practically giving away precious timber in return for the long-term destruction of woodlands that provide essential ecosystem and climate mitigation services”, Brown added.

The environment pressure group suggested several solutions, including a total ban of commercial timber harvesting, except in exceptional circumstances, and only after thorough resources assessments and a determination of sustainable harvesting.

“Only if the timber will be used for significant value addition in Namibia (i.e. as furniture or other goods). Raw Namibian timber (round and squared logs and planks) should not be allowed to be exported,” he reiterated.

Brown said the woodlands in north-eastern Namibia should be protected.

“Local communities should be permitted to use woodlands on a sustainable, small-scale basis to support local livelihoods. Any trade from local use (craft, furniture) should be for finished products, not raw timber,” the chamber had said.

According to Brown, the Zambezi/Caprivi state forest and other woodlands identified as critical wildlife corridors within the Kavango-Zambezi Trans-frontier Conservation Area must be strictly protected by law, with no clearing allowed for any purposes.