Chinese firms are still stealing Myanmar’s forests

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WHEN soldiers in Myanmar raided a huge illegal logging site in Kachin, a war-torn northern state, they swooped upon a thousand ill-paid labourers imported from neighbouring Yunnan, a province in China. Some of the Chinese managed to flee into the jungle, surviving for days without food and water before escaping across the border. The unluckiest—more than 150 of them—were arrested and prosecuted. China barked at Myanmar in July, when a court in Kachin state handed most of them life sentences. They were soon pardoned and deported, but only after having spent six months in custody.
This diplomatic spat is probably just another blip for the Chinese gangsters who have been denuding Myanmar’s northern forests for more than 25 years, driven by their compatriots’ voracious appetite for timber. Ten years ago a crackdown on both sides of the border seemed to have the loggers nailed. Yet a study published on September 17th by the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), a London-based charity, argues that the illicit trade has regrown, and may be reaching a new peak. It reports that Myanmar lost 1.7m hectares of forest between 2001 and 2013, of which at least a chunk was smuggled over the border from Kachin to Yunnan. Since 2009 Myanmar’s average annual tree loss has roughly doubled, to 185,000 hectares.

Myanmar’s laws decree that wood and wooden products may only be exported through the river ports at Yangon, its old capital and biggest city, and never to its neighbours over land (see map). Foreign sales of logs were banned completely in April 2014. But those rules mean nothing to corrupt members of the army, which controls around 60% of Kachin: they sell safe passage to loggers entering from China. The rules mean even less to the ethnic-Kachin rebels whom the army is fighting. They are said to flog access to tree-topped mountains to Chinese firms as a way to fund their military campaigns.

Even if Myanmar steps up efforts to prune the trade, lasting progress will be difficult without firm support from China. Demand there for cheap foreign timber—to be used both in furniture and as fancy flooring—is only increasing as the Chinese government beefs up protection of its own forests. EIA’s researchers found that officials in Yunnan had largely abandoned previous efforts to support conservation in Myanmar. They do little to hinder the lorry-loads of logs that cross the border, provided the Chinese firms that import them cough up the appropriate tax.

Worries about Myanmar’s over-dependence on China were one big reason why the ruling generals opened their long-isolated country to the world. Since that process started the government has looked less scared of challenging its moody northern neighbour, on this and other issues; the two governments will meet to discuss illegal logging on September 24th. But it is not obvious how Myanmar can expect to tempt Chinese bigwigs to ditch a trade that has so enriched Yunnan’s elites—if not their exploited minions.