
ACTIVISTS ACCUSE POLAND OF LOGGING IN ANCIENT FOREST DESPITE EU ORDER

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WARSAW (Reuters) - Environmental activists accused Poland on Thursday of ignoring an order from the EU's top court to stop large-scale logging in one of Europe's last ancient forests - an allegation dismissed by Warsaw.

Green campaigners told Reuters they had seen commercial loggers as recently as Thursday morning in Bialowieza forest - an area that has become a focal point in a widening standoff between the EU and its biggest eastern member.

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) issued an injunction last week banning logging in the northeast of the forest on the Belarus border. The area is a UNESCO world heritage site, home to rare species and protected by EU law.

The European Commission has said the case was so serious that any continued logging would be considered in a wider EU investigation into whether Warsaw's government is undermining the rule of law.

Campaign group Wild Poland Foundation said activists blocked a working harvester in the Bialowieza area.

"The disposal and sale of the wood proves that today's logging was typically commercial," the organization said.

BEETLES, DEAD TREES

Poland's government led by the nationalist and eurosceptic Law and Justice party (PiS) initially shrugged off the ECJ ruling, saying the only logging going on was legitimate activity to control a beetle outbreak.

FILE PHOTO: Environmental activists chain themselves to a logging machine during an action in the defence of one of the last primeval forests in Europe, Bialowieza forest, Poland May 24, 2017. Banners read "Stop Logging Bialowieza Forest" and "Save Bialowieza Forest".Kacper Pempel/File Photo

On Thursday it said it was removing only dead and weak trunks for safety. "Thus, the actions being conducted are in line with the ECJ decision," the environment ministry said.

But other environmental groups including Greenpeace have accused the government of letting loggers take large numbers of trees for profit, threatening the habitat of the European bison, lynx

and rare birds.

The case has also drawn in other critics of the government, including opposition politicians who have accused PiS of moving towards authoritarian rule by tightening control over courts, prosecutors, state media and other areas.

European Council President Donald Tusk - Poland's former prime minister from a centrist party opposed to PiS - said Warsaw was sending dangerous signals by continuing with the logging. [L5N1KP909]

"This extraordinary arrogance with which injunctions and preliminary rulings, including from European courts, are being rejected signals something very dangerous," Tusk told journalists in Warsaw.

"For me, this hints of a prelude to an announcement that Poland does not need the European Union and the European Union does not need Poland. I will keep on saying that this moment would be one of the most dangerous ones in our history. I am afraid that we are closer to that point than further."

PiS regularly dismisses criticism from the EU as unacceptable foreign meddling.

Environment Minister Jan Szyszko kept up the combative stance on the forest, saying "EU experts cannot distinguish a beetle from a frog," in an interview with Rzeczpospolita newspaper published on Thursday.

Szyszko, who has said he doubts whether global warming is man-made, approved a tripling of the quota of wood that can be harvested in one of three Bialowieza administrative areas in March 2016, triggering the dispute.

Kaynak/Source: