**New Allegations Challenge the Environment Record of Top U.N. Official**

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Amina J. Mohammed, the U.N. deputy secretary-general, has ascended to the lofty pinnacle of global diplomacy on the back of her record as a champion of the environment and the poor. But in January, just weeks before assuming her current job, she spent her final days as Nigeria’s environment minister doing something that has outraged activists. Despite a ban then in force on the export of rosewood, an endangered resource, she signed thousands of certificates authorizing the shipment of vast quantities of the wood.

The certificates “came in bags, and I just signed them because that is what I had to do,” she recalled in an interview last month in her sprawling 38th-floor U.N. headquarters office in Manhattan overlooking the East River. “I don’t remember how many.”

A senior Nigerian forestry official, who asked not to be named, confirmed that Mohammed had signed 2,992 export certificates on Jan. 16.

Mohammed said her action was part of a complicated, though legal, balancing act aimed at ensuring Nigeria’s threatened forests were being harvested sustainably while also honoring contracts with Chinese rosewood importers and protecting the livelihoods of a growing number of Nigerians who depend on the timber trade.

Wood from rosewood trees — also known as kosso — is prized in China for its pinkish hue and purplish-brown streaks. Since 2012, however, the export of rosewood has decimated forests throughout West Africa. Environmentalists fear that uncontrolled deforestation of the region’s woodlands will encourage soil erosion and accelerate the spread of Saharan desert into once productive areas.

Mohammed’s 11th-hour decision to approve the kosso shipments was first documented by a Washington-based environmental group and is now part of an inquiry by the secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), to which Nigeria is a signatory.

In a letter to Nigerian authorities in August 2017, John Scanlon, CITES’s secretary-general, raised concern about information his agency had received indicating that as many as 10,000 containers of Nigerian rosewood had been stopped by Chinese authorities between May and December 2016, because they were not accompanied by the proper CITES documentation, according to Michael Osakuade, the acting director of Nigeria’s Department of Forestry. On Dec. 31, 2016, Mohammed herself imposed a three-month ban on the trade in rosewood. Yet following Mohammed’s mass signings, more than two weeks after the ban went into force, the trade quickly resumed: Chinese trade data show that between then and April, as many as 12,000 containers of kosso logs were cleared to enter the country.

Yuan Liu, a spokesman for CITES, declined to comment on the letter on the grounds that a committee of signatories to the treaty needed to approve public statements on the matter. But Liu previously confirmed to Foreign Policy by email that CITES “has been in communication with China and Nigeria” about the kosso trade. He referred FP to an Oct. 6 compliance report underscoring the treaty body’s concerns about the prospect of wrongdoing. It urges that signatories to the endangered species treaty “should not accept any CITES permit or certificate for [kosso wood] issued by Nigeria unless its authenticity has been confirmed by the Secretariat.”

The permit dispute has attracted international scrutiny of the record of one of Africa’s leading diplomatic figures while highlighting the challenges of maintaining the highest environmental standings in the face of powerful political pressure to generate new sources of revenue as low oil prices have handicapped Nigeria’s economy.

Concerns about Mohammed’s mass signing of the export certificates was first raised by the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), a Washington-based advocacy group, following a two-year undercover investigation into illegal logging in West Africa.

The group plans on Thursday to release a 40-page report alleging that Mohammed’s approval of the kosso exports violated the CITES agreement. EIA claims that the former Nigerian minister broke the convention’s rules by permitting the shipments of kosso logs that were mislabeled as processed or semi-processed wood — which can be legally exported under the agreement — and that she retroactively approved exports of rosewood shipments that left Nigerian ports without the required certificates.

For years, the CITES secretariat urged signatories to the wildlife convention not to issue or accept any permits signed after a threatened species has been exported. In late 2016, CITES raised concern that the practice of retrospectively issuing permits “leads to the creation of loopholes for illegal trade.”

Mohammed denied EIA’s charges, saying she never approved the export of mislabeled logs and that she only signed permits for kosso that was still in Nigeria. She also said the only reason she signed the CITES permits during a wood trade ban was that the documents, which were ordered before the ban came into force, were delayed at the printers. But CITES has shown no indication that it is satisfied by Mohammed’s account — which had been relayed to it by the Nigerian Forestry Department in September — and it intends to address Nigeria’s conduct during a meeting of treaty signatories in Geneva from Nov. 27 to Dec. 1.

EIA estimates that Mohammed’s approval of certificates in January 2017 allowed the delivery of more than 1.4 million kosso logs that had been illegally exported between May and December 2016 and were detained in Chinese ports. EIA furnished FP with six copies of certificates signed by Mohammed and dated Jan. 16, a little more than two weeks after she ordered the temporary three-month ban on the export of Nigerian kosso wood. A senior Nigerian forestry official confirmed the authenticity of the certificates but denied that they were issued for rosewood that had already left for China.

The thousands of “hand-signed permits violate both Nigeria’s export ban” and provisions of the endangered species treaty, Alexander von Bismarck, the executive director of EIA, claimed in an interview with FP. “More importantly, the laundering of Nigerian rosewood decimates millions of hectares of fragile forest and imperils the lives of millions of people.”

The episode has proved particularly awkward for a high-profile diplomat who has earned a reputation as one of the world’s leading proponents of sustainable development.

From 2012 to 2015, Mohammed served as former U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s point person for development, leading the international body’s effort to strike agreement on a major set of international targets — the so-called Sustainable Development Goals — to relieve poverty and protect the world’s environments. (This week, FP named Mohammed as Diplomat of the Year in recognition of her work.)

Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari appointed Mohammed environment minister in November 2015. During her tenure, she cultivated a reputation as an innovator, promoting Nigeria’s listing of more than $60 million in “green bonds” to finance renewable energy projects, including a tree planting program in the country’s arid north.

Mohammed took on the job as Nigeria’s top environmental official at a time when the region was emerging as a major source of rosewood timber for Chinese importers. Along with destroying forests, the illegal rosewood trade also provided a source of revenue for terrorists and anti-government forces from the Ivory Coast to Nigeria and Senegal.

Despite these concerns, between 2012 and 2015 Nigeria went from a net importer of wood to the world’s largest exporter of kosso, shipping out an average of 3,000 logs each day between January 2014 and December 2016, according to EIA.

Nigeria has banned the export of all logs since 1976, and in May 2016 CITES added kosso to a list of species that require the signing of an international certificate before it can be legally exported. In February, CITES imposed even greater constraints on the kosso trade, requiring exporters to provide proof that the shipment of rosewood would not threaten its extinction. Nigerian forestry officials insist that they have never approved the export of kosso logs; traders are permitted to ship only processed wooden planks, plywood, or pre-cut pieces of furniture that can be assembled abroad, they say.

Yet Chinese trade data and Chinese importers tell a different story: Virtually all Nigerian exports to China arrive as raw logs, which local manufacturers prefer.

“The majority of kosso coming from Nigeria to China is in the form of squared logs,” said Xiufang Sun, a Beijing-based analyst with Forest Trends, which tracks the rosewood trade.

Efforts to control the kosso trade have been complicated by the fact that Nigeria is a republic of 36 states that have considerable authority to regulate their own forests, said Theodore Leggett, an expert with the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime.

“How much of this is legal is complicated,” Leggett said. “There is considerable variation in state policies, running the gamut from no rules at all to complete prohibition.”

Nigeria’s inefficient bureaucracy also compounded the problem. The new CITES requirements first agreed to in February 2016 overwhelmed the Environment Ministry and its staff, who received endless piles of requests for export permits.

Mohammed said that in early 2016, she grew alarmed by the possibility that kosso was being exported illegally. The large volume of certificates reaching her desk “caught my attention,” she recalled. “I said, ‘Hang on a minute. Let’s have some homework done here.’”

In April of that year, she ordered a temporary ban on all wood exports in order to assess the state of the trade; CITES was due the following month to impose a new set of restrictions.

But shiploads of kosso continued to enter Chinese ports, many of them lacking the now-required CITES permits. Chinese authorities began detaining the wood imports, insisting that they could not be permitted through customs without the proper documents.

Nigerians dependent on the timber trade reacted with outrage; everyone from wealthy businessmen to lumber workers complained about lost income. The ministry began to worry that the suspension would push Nigerian families into poverty as the timber industry began to lay off already low-earning workers.

The temporary ban, Mohammed said, caused a furious “backlash” from “every Tom, Dick, and Harriet in Nigeria to what we were doing in stopping a legitimate business going on.”

Local officials objected that the move threatened legal contracts with the Chinese as well as local jobs. A representative from one state, she said, “came back to me to say, ‘You have taken a whole bunch of young people out of work. They have now started to become armed robbers.’”

On June 3, Mohammed convened a meeting of federal and state forestry officials and timber exporters to devise a plan for managing Nigeria’s kosso trade and to develop a scheme to rehabilitate Nigeria’s dwindling forests.

The group agreed to commission a national study to determine the extent of deforestation and proposed a plan for funding conservation efforts. But the government also yielded to pressure from exporters and parliament to “temporarily [lift the ban] to ease the hardship faced by exporters whose goods were awaiting shipment,” according to a document provided by Mohammed’s aides in New York.

Mohammed said she was still not satisfied that she had gained control over the lightly regulated kosso trade. She decided to temporarily reimpose a rosewood ban on Dec. 31 in order to develop a viable long-term plan to protect Nigeria’s woodlands. But in order to address the demands of exporters, Mohammed decided during the final months of 2016 to approve large numbers of requests to ship kosso to China before the December ban came into force.

But Mohammed denies EIA’s allegations that the papers she signed in January were used to release thousands of containers that were detained in China without certificates the prior year.

She said the certificates were used to approve the export of processed and semi-processed kosso shipments that had yet to sail from Nigerian ports. Mohammed’s office said Chinese authorities never informed Nigeria that containers of kosso had been detained in China, and she could only recall two cases where exporters had appealed for certificates to release wood shipments in China. One request was rejected. The other was granted a permit “on the condition that the company in question was fined and suspended for a minimum of six months to serve as a deterrent to others,” Mohammed’s office wrote in response to follow-up questions.

“The ministry does not issue CITES in retrospect,” her office said.

In an interview at Nigeria’s Environment Ministry in the capital of Abuja, Osakuade, the top Nigerian forestry official, and a second top forestry official told FP that there was a simple explanation for Mohammed’s mass signing of the certificates in January: The ministry had run out of paper.

Prior to the December trade ban, Mohammed had grown concerned about reports that some exporters were forging CITES permits. She then ordered new tamper-proof permits to be designed that would protect the ministry from fraud.

Mohammed planned to approve a batch of certificates before the trade ban was set to go into effect at the end of December, but the newly arrived papers didn’t arrive until January, leaving a group of exporters in limbo.

“It wasn’t her fault. She wanted to send those things the first week in December, but there were no forms,” the second forestry official said. “She had already given [the exporters] her word. It would have been callous and wicked” to renege on the agreement.

The question of who bears the ultimate responsibility for Nigeria’s shrinking forests remains hotly contested. Rebecca S. Manasseh, the environment commissioner for the Nigerian state of Taraba, where most of the rosewood exports originate, placed the blame on Asia.

“It was the Chinese,” she said. “They were the ones who brought the idea of cutting down the wood. Before it was not like this — it was when they came into the country that it became so bad.”

But Manasseh also pointed fingers at the central government. “Our governor wrote to the federal government, pleading with the government to stop the exportation of that wood,” she said.

When confronted with Manasseh’s accusation, the second federal forestry official interviewed by FP fired back: “Why are you complaining to us when you are the ones issuing approval for the exporters to go and harvest and you are taking the money as revenue for your state?”

For Mohammed, the rosewood issue was one of trying to strike a balance between the legitimate economic interests of Nigerians involved in the timber trade and preserving the country’s forests. She said the series of decisions she made, from issuing a temporary suspension to signing the thousands of certificates, was part of trying to find a strategy for sustainable development.

“We were doing this for the right reasons,” she said.