

Hungarians protest as logging rules eased amid fuel crisis

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Climate activists protest against Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's decision to waive rules protecting native forests from logging, in Budapest, Hungary (Photo by Reuters)

Budapest, August 14 (RHC)-- Thousands of Hungarians have protested against an easing of logging rules to meet increased demand for firewood amid the worsening fuel crisis in Europe.

Earlier this month, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's cabinet decided to ease the rules on logging, citing the effects of the war in Ukraine on oil and gas prices. But this action was met with the clear opposition of many environmental activists because they believe that the decision could accelerate deforestation and cause irreparable damage to the environment.

"This is our common future. We all feel the effects of the climate change on our skins and cutting down trees will only make it worse," said protester Fanni Fodor.

The rally was organized by the green liberal LMP party, which has five opposition lawmakers in the 199-member parliament. In response to critics, the Hungarian government says that cutting down trees will only be allowed in times of emergency, but some environmental groups have strongly warned of the consequences of the action.

"The loosening of regulations in the government decree is so substantial, which is on a par only with those implemented in the 20th century under even more critical circumstances," Laszlo Galhidy, a WWF Hungary official, said in a statement. "Hungarian forests have yet to fully recover from those consequences."

Hungary is dependent on Russia for most of its energy and Orban, who has lobbied hard to secure an exemption from EU sanctions on Russian crude oil imports, has banned the export of fuels, including firewood, from Hungary.

The Hungarian government says the country can produce 3.5 million cubic meters of firewood annually, and that it is necessary to loose rules given an increase in demand, driven in part by Orban curbing his policy of subsidizing household utility bills.

Demand for stoves using solid fuels, including coal and firewood, has increased to around 12 times last July's levels after the utility bill subsidies were tightened, according to a report by online retailer eMAG earlier this month.

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