

Forest Dept probes fired officials' links with smugglers

THE NATION

SEEKING TO purge all the “bad apples”, the Royal Forest Department (RFD) is trying to determine whether six of its officials recently sacked for selling protected phayung (Siamese rosewood) to a Chinese investor had links to a transnational logging and smuggling gang and whether any other officials were involved.

RFD chief Attapol Charoenchansa has instructed RFD Forest Fire Control Office director Cheewaparp Cheewatham to lead the probe, according to Attapol's deputy,

Amnuayporn Choldamrongkul. The National Parks Department's Phaya Sua Forest crime-suppression task force accused the six RFD officials of involvement in phayung logging and sale of timber to a Chinese investor. Some of the logs were seized as evidence. All six were fired from the civil service, Amnuayporn said.

Four of them – Panithan Pathumchankaew, Pakphum Intharat, Jirapong Pathumchan and Surapong Bangdee – were arrested in Tambon Pawa in Chanthaburi's Kaeng Hang Maew district and placed in court-ordered detention, said

Amnuayporn. The other two – Anirut Jampathong and Nipon Nakkasem – remain at large. Amnuayporn said the six had allegedly been involved in “log laundering” for a long time. She alleged that they arrested illegal loggers and smugglers and then kept some of the timber seized off the books so they could sell it themselves to an investor. The Mulan gang bears the name of a key member, a 40-year-old Chinese national nicknamed Mulan who has the Thai name Chalida Suphanthamat. Chalida reportedly served as a lumber broker for firms in China.