



Green Scenery

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The Country's Natural Resources Are Nature's Gift To Us What We Make Of Them Are Our Gift To Posterity

Freetown, 4 December 2012

Press Release

For Immediate Release

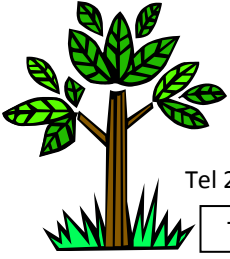
Aggrieved landowners and land-users in Malen Chiefdom, Pujehun, call on Human Rights Commission to intervene against human rights violations by Paramount Chief and chiefdom authorities in Socfin operation area

More than a hundred representatives of landholding families from 36 villages affected by a large-scale investor in oil palm plantation in Malen Chiefdom, Pujehun District, have signed a resolution stating that they disassociate themselves from any lease agreement signed on their behalf by the Paramount Chief and chiefdom authorities of Malen Chiefdom with the Government of Sierra Leone. Furthermore, it says "...we will no longer allow the Socfin Agricultural Company personnel and or their machines to enter upon or operate on our land." The resolution was issued with a letter written by MALOA, an association of affected landowners and users in Malen Chiefdom, on behalf of affected landholding families and addressed to the Human Rights Commission for their intervention against human rights abuses such as intimidation. The document was signed in Pujehun on 1st of December 2012 at a meeting of aggrieved landholding families from Malen Chiefdom.

In the letter the association complains about ongoing harassment, molestation and intimidation of landowners opposing the land deal by the Paramount Chief and chiefdom authorities. It says that land has been forcefully taken by the company with the authority of the Paramount Chief, ignoring the protest of the landholding families. "The present operations of the Socfin Agricultural company is against our progress and economic viability and a blatant disregard to our ownership of our respective family land in the Malen Chiefdom which we can no longer accept," states the letter, and it announces peaceful resistance against any further company operation on their land.

Socfin Agricultural Company S.L. Limited (SAC) is a subsidiary of the Belgium company, Socfin. SAC leased over 6,500 hectares in Malen chiefdom, Pujehun District for over 50 years with a possible extension of 21 years to establish oil palm and rubber plantations. The company signed in March 2011 a sub-lease with the Government of Sierra Leone, which holds the lead lease with the chiefdom council. The company pays US\$ 5 rent per year per acre, with only half of it going to the land owners. Land users, mainly women, are not compensated. Mainly casual and unskilled employment is offered to mostly young male Sierra Leoneans. The salary is 10,000 Leones per day. Extension plans for a second phase over 5,500 hectare for oil palm plantations under similar conditions to the first phase are in progress. Communities in the prospective lease area have already written letters stating that they will not agree to any lease arrangements with the investor.

Research undertaken by several NGOs on the Socfin land deal have revealed the lack of transparency, the absent of free, prior and informed consent of landowners, inadequate compensation, intimidation through local authorities and the loss of farmland of affected communities. The District Officer in Pujehun is familiar



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with the matter. Complaints issued by landholding families on the destruction of their tree-crop plantations by Socfin employees and entering of family land in the investor's operation area by survey teams have been sent to him and fill a thick file in his office.

Several initiatives to address the conflict have been undertaken including stakeholders like the former and newly re-appointed Vice-president, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security, The District Council, the chiefdom authorities and company management, as well as Civil Society organizations, but none has succeeded. To date, the grievances of land owners and users have not been addressed.

Consequently the MALOA letter ends with the note to the Human Rights Commission "It is in this regard that we are humbly requesting for your timely intervention so as to forestall any further eventuality. We are now desperate and can no longer tolerate the operations of the Socfin Company on our family land."

Green Scenery and other NGOs working on large scale investments in agriculture are calling for a moratorium on land deals, a review of signed lease agreements and Memorandum of Understandings and for binding regulations. Up to date more than 20% of the arable land in Sierra Leone is leased or is about to be acquired by large scale foreign investors. Little is known about the legal aspects and the costs and benefits of the deals for future generations.

The letter and resolution of MALOA can be accessed at www.greenscenery.org

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