

PRESS RELEASE

Land Rights Defenders Condemn Gross Human Rights Abuses in Sahn Malen

FREETOWN, 30th January, 2019: Proponents of land rights in Sierra Leone note with grave concern the grave human rights violations against members of the Malen Affected Landowners and users Association (MALOA) who were dispossessed of their land by the agro-based multinational SOCFIN investment company. It is worth noting that since the inception of SOCFIN in the Sahn Malen Chiefdom, Pujehun District in 2009, more than 80% of the Chiefdom's arable land was leased by the company to produce palm oil. During the negotiation of the agreement, the free prior and informed consent of land owners was not respected and insufficient consultations were held with the chiefdom's indigenous people. This has since resulted in serious conflict between the company and landowners. Local land owners and activists have come under sustained intimidation, harassment, and attack for defending their land rights and challenging the excesses of the company.

On Monday 21st January, 2019, an unfortunate skirmish ensued between members of the traditional 'Poro' Society and state security personnel deployed to protect the company. A group of the traditional 'Poro' Society members were purportedly identified by the government security forces as representatives of MALOA group, resulting in the death of two civilians who were allegedly shot dead by state security personnel. Hundreds of members of MALOA were harassed, intimidated and physically assaulted, their houses vandalized and properties and cash amounting to millions of Leones were looted. Consequently, two thousand five hundred people have been displaced and thousands more continue to live in perpetual fear.

The rights to life, protection of security and safety of persons, unlawful arrest and detention, right to property, the right to food and dignified life are amongst the human rights safeguards that were severely violated by the security forces. During a fact finding mission undertaken by land rights defenders between the 24th and 27th January, 2019; the following human rights violations were recorded:

- The arbitrary arrest, detention and beating of particularly members of MALOA who have become direct target of intimidation, harassment and violence by either government security personnel or company officials;
- Excessive use of force by Military and the Police against protesting civilians and other community members during raids mostly undertaken during hours when they were sleeping.
- Extra-judicial killing of two civilians shot dead during the protest between the members of the traditional 'Poro' society and the government security personnel;
- Looting and vandalising of properties for which the communities accused personnel of government security forces;

In view of the above, we therefore call on the government to:

- Respect its obligations to international human rights laws in relation to business and human rights;
- Set up an independent and credible coroner's inquest to establish the cause of death of the two deceased, and commence investigations and a judicial process to hold the perpetrators to account;
- Order the unconditional release of all MALOA members arrested and detained for over a week now by the Sierra Leone Police;
- Facilitate the return of all displaced people and offer reassurances for their security and wellbeing;
- Make sure that the Lease Agreement between SOCFIN and the Community of Malen Chiefdom which expired in 2017 is urgently reviewed and the review should be all-inclusive with concerns of local communities taken into accounts;
- Respect its responsibility to protect and to provide remedy for the MALOA affected Communities;
- Ensure an immediate investigation of the Chiefdom administration by the Anti-Corruption Commission on the use of the Chiefdom 20% shares from the SOCFIN annual lease payment;

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