

# NATURAL RESOURCE WATCH

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## Criminalizing Land Rights Advocates and Reputational Damage



*Makeni People's Forum: field trip session*

In the sub region, state securities must redeem their image as poor communities struggles with the issues of land, natural resources and environmental governance and protection. This concern must take center stage in the continuum of providing safeguards for the rule of law and addressing lingering grievances with potential for undermining the peace and security of the region.

Here is why this point must be elevated to a national and regional security level. The Mano River Union Civil Society Natural Resources Rights and Governance Platform (MRU CSO Platform) as a West African regional Network runs a secretariat from Monrovia, Liberia and has established cross border linkages with partners in all of the 15 West African countries to focus on the questions of natural resources, land and environmental governance. Key beneficiaries of the intervention are frontline grassroots environmental, land and human rights defenders whose influence have over the years been beclouded by contrivances of officialdom to make them appear as outcast, rather than the unsung heroes and heroines clamoring for justice in the land grabbing, egregious human rights abuses and environmental degradation over-drive of multinational companies in cahoots with the governments across West Africa.

The region has witnessed the knowing and willful criminalization and malignment of grassroots frontline defenders. The MRU CSO Platform has identified that it is the national security outfit, the Police, the army and other agents of governments that are involved in the massive criminalization of defenders across the region.

There is therefore a need for Governments and their national security agencies in the sub-region to redeem their image in the protection of human rights defenders, lest the reputational damage that comes

with such amenability in taking orders from above will create future incidences of national and subregional conflicts.

In the First Peoples Forum of 2018, at the provincial capital of Makeni, northern Sierra Leone, the organizers of that event did not purposively set out to 'find the perpetrators,' if you like. But the event was designed in the continuum of demanding accountability and transparency over a sector that has over the years been shrouded in secrecy.

In spite of the fact that the thrust of the conversation was to hear from those affected by land grabbing, the presence of state authorities, notably the host Paramount Chief of Bombali, Shebora Kasanga, demonstrated the desire in fostering collective solution seeking pathway in the process of safeguarding the environment for the good of the generality.

Why then would those predisposed to championing the accountability and transparency in local communities affected by land grab be subjected to all manner of hassles, persecution, prosecution and even death? Who are the dominant culprits of this syndrome?

Those questions were not purposively asked at the First People's Makeni Forum to apportion blame, but by the openness of the frank discussions that ensued, there were persistent and recurring mentioning of state security agencies- running through narratives of defenders from Mali, Liberia Guinea, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Niger, Ivory Coast.

Let's consider some direct quotes linking state security to acts of violence against grassroots defenders starting with the Malian experience:

A land rights defender and a community activist (name withheld for protection purposes) from Mali said gold mining companies in the country have caused water pollution crisis for them. He cited the two main gold mining companies SEMOS and Morila that have not done much in terms of development. He however alluded to one of the company's development fund set up in 2000 with an annual budget of US\$ 250,000 but they only came to know about it in 2005. Part of this money, he disclosed, is used by the office of the Mayor to pay the Police.

He who pays the piper dictates the tune; it suffices to say that where the gold mining companies are paying the Police, they are invariably used as instruments of state clamp down on local dissent against unfair land deals.

We can find similar instance elsewhere in the sub region. In Niger, according to another land rights defender and a community activist (name withheld for

protection purposes), “a massive hotel tourism has caused serious health hazards for my community after people drank contaminated water.... the government and investors used state security to evict people from the land...”

In Sierra Leone a land rights defender of Bumbuna, home to the country’s hydroelectric power plant recounted how in 2007 they were forcibly evicted from farm lands using state security to allow African Mineral of Frank Timis to operate. He said 140 of his colleagues were arrested and detained on bogus charges. One person was reported killed in said local opposition to the company.

For posting on social media his protest of these actions, he revealed that he was banished by the Paramount Chief of Bumbuna and has since relocated to the capital Freetown from where he is pursuing a university degree at Njala University College.

Ghana shares the same story of state security criminalization of defenders. A land rights defender and a community activist (name withheld for protection purposes), is a leader from Saaman

community who was arrested for his resistance and advocacy against land grabbing. He spent four days in detention. He paid tribute to women activism in staging a constructive protest that ensured his release. He used his experience to send a note of caution to other grassroots defenders in resisting gifts from the land grabbers.

The snippets of instances captured in countries of the ECOWAS about the pattern of state security criminalization of grassroots land rights defenders is becoming pervasive. It is an unfortunate act that is not conflict sensitive for which civil society must be voluble in condemning such tendencies. For the rule of law is at best cultivated in a tranquil context. The state suppression of protests against land rights can best be supplanted by having open negotiations and discussions around concession agreements and building enforceable consensus around such agreements even at the implementation stage. The politicization of the Police must be jettisoned and good judgment must take precedence over serving the few vested interest riding rough shod over public interest in land investments.



*L-R: Patric Mucus/GIZ; Dr. John Kabia/ FGHR; Radiatu Sherriff/GAI and participants at the Makeni Summit*

# Our Thoughts

## Corporate Culpability

**Countries in the Mano** River Union basin and the wider West African region are gifted with abundant natural resources. In spite of this rich endowment, citizens of these countries are at the very top of the league of the poorest of the poor countries in the world. It should be said that these poor communities continue to suffer various types of violations in the hands of multinational corporations with impunity. These plantations and mining companies operating across the region are unapologetic in their mistreatment of the people – they snub their corporate obligations and social responsibilities; they forcibly displace the people; deny them of their livelihoods; degrade the environment and destroy their properties.

**Worst still**, governments in the region are complicit in these corporate abuses. They fail to protect their own citizens against these foreign corporations and deny them access to relevant information and education about these so-called investments, even though these indigenous and deprived people are incidentally the ones directly affected by these investments. In some instances, state security agencies (especially the police) are used to violently quell dissent.

**Form one country** to the other in the sub-region, the stories are nearly the same. Exploitation of natural resources has triggered conflicts and deepened problems of poverty and undermined development. It is simply a tale of bad governance and corruption. Ultimately, ordinary citizens are left destitute and hopeless.

**Thankfully, in April of 2011**, the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR) awarded Green Advocates a grant to support the work of the Mano River Union Civil Society Natural Resources Rights and Governance Platform. The support was initially for five civil society organizations in five countries to enable them research and publish natural resource rights profiles of their countries among other issues relating to creating visibility about the platform as part of its support for Corporate Accountability Program in West Africa.

**Five years later, in April of 2016**, the Fund awarded a second grant to Green Advocates on behalf of the MRU CSO Partners to among other things, expand the scope of the Platform in order to bring in more organizations locally and regionally among other things.

**Going forward**, Green Advocates International – Liberia, successfully organized the first people's forum/summit of the MRU CSO Natural Resources Rights and Governance Platform in Makeni, Sierra Leone, with the Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD) and the Sierra Leone Network on the Right to Food (SiLNoRF), playing host. For four intensive days, 18 to 21 March 2019, more than fifty environmental and rights defenders convened on the theme, "Developing Strategies to Educate, Mobilize and Empower Affected Communities and Indigenous Peoples to Ensure Corporate Accountability in West Africa."

**The Makeni summit** was certainly a huge solution seeking moment against state-sponsored corporate abuses. For the first time, little known, grassroots defenders, whose voices never had a hearing space, were mobilized under one roof to cement a solidarity movement. They were environmental and land rights activists, they came from informal labor/workers organizations, they were local chiefs, women rights groups, poor entrepreneurial organizations, communities affected by the operations of powerful companies and civil society activists. But most of all, they were indigenous people who have been dispossessed of their ancestral inheritance and livelihoods.

**The message from Makeni** is all too clear and pointed. The people have had enough – enough subjugation that they are ready to take matters into their own hands. They are resolved that it is not sufficient to weep and protest about their plight, but that they will seek redress through local and international grievance mechanisms and legal actions to restore their rights and hold those culpable to account.

## Seeking Justice for Victims: ECOWAS Court Hears Arguments



On February 6, 2020, the ECOWAS Court of Justice heard arguments in two landmark cases that broke new grounds in community rights advocacy. Essentially, the governments of Niger and Guinea are being made to answer some questions about their complicity in allegations of human rights violations against their own people.

Guinean NGO, Mêmes Droits pour Tous (MDT) and Réseau DH-Gouvernance in Niger, working in partnership with Advocates for Community alternatives (ACA) and other members of the Public Interest Lawyering Initiative for West Africa (PILIWA), filed separate complaints at the ECOWAS Court of Justice in October 2018. The suits related to victims of the Zoghota massacre in the forested regions of southern Guinea, and the other for several families whose land was illegally expropriated by the government of Niger. After more than a year, the plaintiffs' arguments were heard in open court.

In the Guinea case, the plaintiffs accuse the State of having ordered and facilitated murder, arbitrary arrest, torture, destruction of private property, and other abuses against the people of Zogota community. On the night of 4 August 2012, just after midnight, agents of the Guinean security and defense forces attacked Zogota Village, firing at random, killing six residents, wounding several more, burning homes, and arresting and torturing several people.

This attack came in retaliation against demonstrations by communities who opposed the abusive practices of the international mining consortium Vale-BSG, which was infringing their fundamental rights. But to date, Guinea has failed to investigate or hold anyone responsible. Pépé Antoine Lama, lawyer for the victims and the Acting President of MDT, explained: For us, this trial is an important step to ensure that justice is served for the massacre victims and to end the impunity of the Guinean government in the Zogota case. We filed complaints against five commanding

officers in the Guinean security forces and also against Vale-BSG for having given material support to the security forces who committed the massacre. But in more than seven years, the Guinea justice system has made little progress towards holding anyone accountable. The victims demand justice.

Kpakilé Gnadawolo Kolié, one of the plaintiffs in the case and a representative of the victims of the Zogota massacre, said:

For more than seven years, we waited for the case in Guinea to go forward, and we'd completely lost hope. But now that we're here, I can allow myself to hope again. We're relying on the ECOWAS Court of Justice to vindicate our rights, and I'm optimistic that justice will be served for us. The Court should require the Republic of Guinea to find and prosecute the perpetrators of the massacre.

I cannot close without giving my heartfelt thanks to our lawyers at MDT, to ACA, to Jonathan, and to Lalla. Without you, this case would never have been revived. We have confidence in you.

In the Niger case, the complainants allege that the State violated national laws as well as international standards on the right to property when it took land in the fertile valley of Gountou Yena that was the residents' sole source of livelihood, without prior consultation or compensation. Their land was then given to a Nigerian company, Summerset Continental, for the construction of a luxury hotel. The State took unjustified administrative actions to revoke and retroactively cancel the property rights that it had previously recognized as belonging to the families of Gountou Yena. "We are convinced that the ECOWAS Court of Justice will render justice to these families whose ancestral land was illegally expropriated, and who have lost faith in the process of justice in Niger," declared Idrissa Tchernaka, counsel for the victims and President of the Réseau DH-Gouvernance (Human Rights and Governance Network).

In spite of a local judge's order requiring the company to stop construction while the land dispute was pending in court, the Nigerien state provided military and police force to Summerset Continental to expel the residents and destroy all homes and building on the site. According to Seydou Mamane Hamidou, a plaintiff and representative of the families of Gountou Yena:

Under the protection of the security forces, bulldozers sent by Summerset Continental destroyed everything in just a few hours. They razed all our fruit trees, vegetable gardens, crops, temporary structures... nothing was left. We lost everything and never received anything for our losses. We hope for the restitution of our lands or just compensation.

“The members of PILIWA hail the opening of this trial and hope the judges of the ECOWAS Court of Justice will render justice for communities that are traumatized by the actions of governments that prioritize the interests of foreign companies over the rights of their citizens,” said Barr. Chima Williams, the spokesperson for PILIWA. “We hope for a swift decision from the Court that soothes the suffering of the plaintiffs,” said Jonathan Kaufman, Executive Director of ACA.

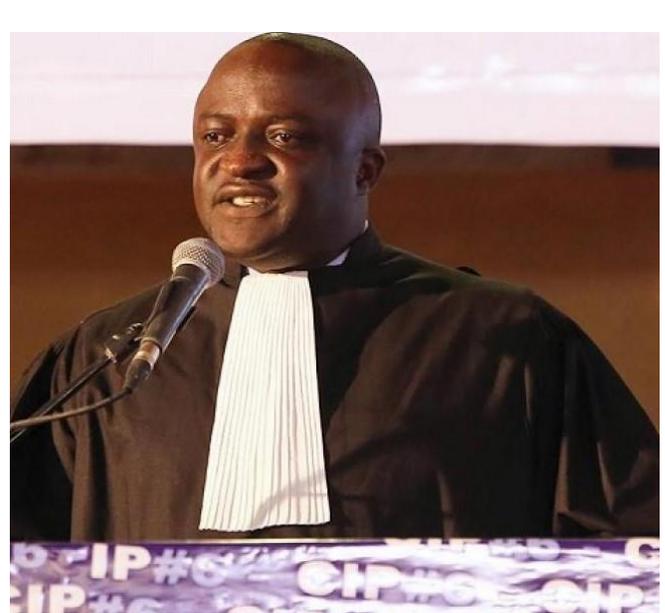
***On the night of 4 August 2012, just after midnight, agents of the Guinean security and defense forces attacked Zogota Village, firing at random, killing six residents, wounding several more, burning homes, and arresting and torturing several people.***



**Chima Williams**



*Jonathan Kaufman, ED ACA*



***Pépé Antoine Lama***

### Testimonial of Lamentations



Monrovia 15th October 2020: **W**omen representatives from three counties Bomi, Cape Mount and Margibi affected by the operation of oil palm and rubber plantations have stated that their pitiable conditions have not changed for the better but rather worsened in the wake of COVID 19 outbreak. Their testimonials were made possible, by courtesy of the Alliance against Industrial Oil Palm using a virtual conferencing tool that brought together other countries in the subregion.

The Natural Resource Women Platform, (NRWP), an affiliate of Green Advocate International, (GAI), mobilized the Liberia women representatives from the affected plantation communities in highlighting their varied forms of plights including: deprivation of land to farm, lack of access to safe drinking water owing to chemical pollution, denial of employments and sacking of their husbands, incidents of secret killings of grassroot land rights defenders, no schooling opportunity for the children and state sponsored brutality in protecting the companies with instances of miscarriages of some pregnant women, among other things.

Speaking on behalf of the women representatives from Margibi Finda Bengo used the occasion to laud the support of GAI in ensuring that they have some level of access to swamp farming and fishing. She however lamented that the company is victimizing them in casual labor denial to slash grass for pittance in the plantation and even have denied access to the bush to burn coal for their livelihoods “because of our continued reliance on GAI in defending their rights” against the exploitation of subsidiary of SOCFIN, Salala Rubber Corporation, SRC. She said SRC is accusing them of inviting GAI in raising issues leading to the suspension of work in the plantation.

Massa Turay of Grand Cape Mount said “We now go to neighboring towns and villages and pay for plots of land to farm cassava at the cost of 50 USD.”

Tenneh Varney from Bomi County said they find it risky to go into the bushes as women because there are incidents of secret killings, noting that community members have been discovering unidentified graves in the forest. She added: “even if when we report these disturbing situations to our political and local leaders, they cannot not take any action to protect our interest against the new company MANCO that took over from Sime Darby.

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Policy Adviser of the Natural Resource Women Platform Radiatu Sherriff provided an overview of the session as an engagement initiated by their partner Alliance against Industrial Oil Palm Plantation to use virtual meeting tool in reaching to hear from the constituents about the emerging issues occasioned by the pandemic. She said the essence is to find solutions to problems that abound in the sector.

Head of the Natural Resource Women Platform Secretariat, Veronica Gray traced the establishment of the NRWP that was initially the Forest Women Platform in 2010. The organization evolved to have a broader outlook reflecting the wider spheres of natural resource livelihood engagement of women. She said it was in this regard that the group had a name change in 2012; and now referred to as Natural Resource Women Platform that has since been working with the grassroots women representatives who attended the virtual meeting that involved other countries Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Cameroon, Congo and Sierra Leone.

It was disclosed that Alliance against Industrial Oil Palm Plantation advocates to curtail corporate land grabbing that puts women in disadvantaged situations. In 2013 the Alliance hosted a meeting in Calabar Nigeria to come out with a clear roadmap in pushing through three objectives of understanding the nature of land grabbing corporations and their financing arrangements, the mapping of those communities affected by industrial land grabbing and the strengthening of those affected by the land dispossession trend of multinational companies.

In response to what is needed to address their situation, the women made a passionate appeal, calling for strengthening of their advocacy skills, support that will lead to alternative economic empowerment, compensations for their land and effort to be exerted on land grabbing companies in disclosing the land agreements with a view to ensuring that their benefits and entitlements in these agreements are honored.

The Alliance has taken note of these concerns and recommended solutions with assurance that actions will be considered for short, mid and long-term interventions.

## **Making Grassroot Human Rights Defenders Count**



**Community Activists in break-up session**

They are the “first responders – the nameless and faceless , our Firewall”- “and they are sometimes among the first casualties as they are in the frontline raising their voices and defending the environment, land, natural resources, sacred traditions, history, culture, tradition, customs, livelihood, innovations, entrepreneurship and cause of their communities when abuses are being committed” says Alfred Brownell, Lead Campaigner of Green Advocates International. They highly get notice for their advocacy. No, they do

not make the headlines simply because they are designated as grassroots activists or just merely anti-development or anti-government protesters. Come to think about it, they are the ones getting their hands dirty and giving up their rights and lives for the rights of others and rarely get credit. They have no staff, no offices, hardly get donor grants but are the most prosecuted.

But things are about to change for the better, at least in the minimal. A baseline assessment on the Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR) of Frontline Grassroots Environmental, Land and Human Rights Defenders (HRD) in West Africa is being conducted across the region ahead of a West African regional conference, seeking to elevate and give visibility to those we called frontline grassroots human rights defenders.

The Baseline Assessment is being Conducted by Green Advocates International based in Liberia in

collaboration with the Mano River Union Civil Society Natural Resources Rights and Governance Platform and supported by the Open Society Foundation (OSF). The project aims to lay the basis to establish a Support, Protection and Response Mechanism for Frontline Grass Roots Environmental, Land and Human Rights Defenders across West Africa; create an opportunity for networking, solidarity actions, experience sharing; provide training, capacity building and other support, including security protection, psychosocial, and cyber and data security to advance the work of defenders in the region among other things.

The 2000 Declaration of Human Rights Defenders puts the responsibility on governments to implement and respect provisions, particularly the duty to protect HRDs from harm because of their work, but most government in the region are found wanting. In fact, HRDs are often referred to as anti-investment, anti-business, anti-country and trouble makers.

In 2016, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of HRDs recommended to states, business enterprises, NHRI, donors, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to focus on creating a safe and enabling environment for HRDs to do their work.

The Cotonou Declaration of 2017, also calls for the protection of all HRDs at risk in the region, specifically those working in conflict and post conflict states, on issues related to land, health, HIV, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, as well as sexual and reproductive health rights.

Despite this global recognition of the problem and policies and conventions aimed at addressing the issues, there remains serious challenges to implementing the types and nature of attacks on HRDs in West Africa. There is a troubling regional trend towards shrinking civil space that allows HRDs in some countries to operate independently. It also shows that the HRDs are being murdered, threatened, stigmatized, harassed and subject to increased governments surveillance both on and offline. The deterioration of the situation of HRDs in West Africa reflects a lack of adequate protection for HRDs in the current context. "In many instances, arbitrary arrest and detention, frivolous criminal charges, false accusations, unfair trial, and conviction of HRDs are commonplace," says Alfred Brownell, the 2019 Goldman Prize winner for Africa, Lead Campaigner of Green Advocates International and Senior Policy Advisor to the Project.

In the 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur recommended that West African countries review, amend and repeal laws that restrict the right to freedom of opinion, expression, association and assembly and take measures to ensure that HRDs can exercise these rights without interference.

Yet, there persist significant gaps in the legal and policy frameworks in the region. Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, and Burkina Faso, are thought to be the only countries that have passed laws that recognize and protect the rights of HRDs. Ensuring that laws and policies exist in the rest of the countries in West Africa is the first step, according to the project document. The next and greater challenge is ensuring that these governments investigate crimes committed against HRDs promptly and impartiality and bring the alleged perpetrators to justice.

Given the enormous barriers and risks HRDs face in their work there is an urgent need to understand better, who is at risk and evaluate the strategies they use to keep themselves safe, identify where the gaps are, and then expand on existing approaches and provide HRDs with both the tools and strategies that are easy to use, effective, accessible and sustainable. That is what this project seeks address, says Brownell.

The project covers the 15 countries in West Africa and Equatorial Guinea. Though Equatorial is not part of the region it is included in the study because of the many human rights issues in the country. At least 10 grassroots activists are being profiled and documented in each of the countries across the region.

Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote D'Ivoire, and Guinea Bissau have had their share of violent conflicts and some stability. The dictator in the Gambia was removed in 2016, but the region remains in the spotlight with violent extremist groups, such as Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, terrorizing Nigeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania.

Added to the equation of drivers of conflict in the region are the disputed elections that often times ignite violence, the fights over natural resources, ethnic divisions, economic and social exclusions. Recent electoral violence in Guinea and La Cote D. Ivoire and protest against police banditry in Nigeria are troubling to say the least.

The region is also host to hundreds of multinational corporations, intended to boost foreign direct

investment under the guise of creating jobs, transferring technology and skills, generating revenues and building the infrastructure of the region yet the scars of poverty conspicuously permeate widely across the region while they instigate and ferment conflicts, in communities they operate in. Various accounts show how foreign companies, with

the backing of their host and home governments, violate local community rights with impunity. Poor people are subjected to a range of violations including displacement, denial of their livelihoods and destruction of property. The situation makes the work of frontline grassroots HRDs, anything but risky.

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## Digesting Slices of Bread of Development Partners and State Actors

Echoes from the First People's Forum/Summit in Makeni, Sierra Leone must serve as a source of inspiration in holding firm to the ideal of protecting local interest against the land grabbing overdrive of multinational corporations. It is refreshing to look back at that event. If you like, our thoughts are on the proverbial finely sliced buttered bread that were served by eminent persons-sharing the zest and commitment of the MRU CSO Natural Resources Rights and Governance Platform.

“We believe that the community and people should be at the forefront of what happens to the valuable things beneath the ground.” This comment is attributed to Mr. Patric Mucus, a Representative from German Development Corporation – GIZ.

He was actually speaking to the negative trend of state collusion with corporate bodies in plundering land for industrial agriculture and mining purposes, that have turned to be onerous to host communities in the sub region.

When he alluded to the fact that it is a core mandate of the GIZ to work towards ensuring that local interests in natural resources are protected, it jells with the object of the first people forum of the MRU CSO Platform in Makeni.

One can in this case want to test the level of commitment from the support areas of GIZ in the subregion to translate statements of policy value in natural resource governance on the realities on the ground. Of specific value to the agenda of the Mano River CSO Platform is the disclosure by Patric Mucus when he said: “...one of the goals of the German Development Corporation is providing voice to the people, as one of the indicators for the next three years in community-based monitoring...” He added that the impacts of multinational companies in land use must be subjected to local scrutiny.

Rightly so, it could be gracious enough for the GIZ to share with us what has been coming from their end in grassroot empowerment to hold corporate bodies and local authorities accountable to terms of concession agreements.

The entire discourse of what obtains in the corporate land and environmental context of the sub region, has the corruption dimension that must not be lost on us.

And when the northern provincial regional head of the Sierra Leone Anti-Corruption Commission Abubakar Kamara took the podium to speak, he cited the evidence of wanton degradation of the environment as a result of corporate investment ventures.

Even as he supported the initiative of the People's Forum, he stopped short of bringing out the prosecution and liability linkages of such actions of multinational companies. This can be read into - he was certainly not authorized to make such strong statement that could grate the feelings of the political leaders at whose behest such state institutions are set up. Or rather, even as anti-corruption arrangements in specific contexts see these crimes, they expect the affected people to come forth with the evidence.

But there is evidently weak capacity of grassroot defenders in digging out these corruption dimension of the corporate bodies using local laws. And this represents the paradox in the commitment to fighting grand corruption involving natural resource diversion at the national level which would necessitate the recourse to sub-regional court of ECOWAS using the Public Interest Lawyering arm of the MRU CSO Platform.

If these finely couched rendering of supports from state and non-state actors at the Makeni people's forum/summit can be reduced to slices of bread served, then we would be compelled to ask some hard questions: How easily these slices of bread can be masticated into bolus-talking about the taking in of

small rounded mass of a substance, especially at the moment of swallowing. What are we saying here? That we must take stock of our stewardship; what is happening farther field in terms of tangibles that are coming from places of obligations to identify with the

cause of distraught land affected community people down there.

## CAO Conducts Complaint Hearings in Liberia



**A community affected by SRC operations**

Indigenous communities uprooted by Socfin's operations in Liberia, are retaining some hope that justice of some sort will be served in their situation no matter how long it takes. They can be hopeful because they have had the pleasure of having the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO) hear their complaint.

CAO is the independent watchdog and accountability mechanism for the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA), of the World Bank Group.

Without the free prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples, the communities alleged in their complaint of 27 May 2019, that the Salala Rubber Corporation (SRC) seized and forcefully evicted the people from their farmlands, destroyed their ancestral graves and sacred sites, dislodged and dispossessed them of their livelihoods, polluted of their waters, sexually harassed women and girls and instituted reprisal and intimidating attacks, all designed to subdue the poor people.

For the background, (SRC) was established by a merger in July 2007 between the rubber processing factory called Weala Rubber Company and a standalone rubber plantation formerly called Salala Rubber Corporation. The plantations were granted concession rights by the Liberian government in 1959, with a land area of 40,000 hectares. Socfin acquired the merged plantations (SRC) in 2007 after the Liberian civil war.

In June 2008, IFC committed a \$10 million USD Loan to Socfin to finance the rehabilitation and optimization program of SRC. IFC told the CAO investigative team, "the Project was intended to complement SRC's management plans to rehabilitate and expand the plantation, which had been neglected during the civil war."

But the rehabilitation plan appears to have breached the terms of the Performance Standards of the IFC and acceptable national and international norms. The Company is accused of violating the human and inheritance rights of nearly two dozen communities in Gleagba, Bloomu, Old Dokai, New Dokai, Bondolon, Massaquoi, Martin Village, Dedee-ta 1, Dedee-ta 2, Kuwah-ta, Jorkporlorsue, Gorbos, Kolledarpon, Monkey-tail, Ansa-ta, Lango, Garjay, Kolongalai, Sayue-ta, Tarteeta, Varmue, and Pennoh, in Margibi and Bong counties.

With the IFC loan, Socfin would go on an expansion spree, bulldozing towns, clearing farmlands and destroying crops with little or no adequate compensation. And the negative impact has had a toll on the religious, cultural, social and economic rights of the people.

Green Advocates International-Liberia and three local partners - Alliance for Rural Democracy (ARD), Natural Resource Women Platform (NRWP), and the Yeagbamah National Congress for Human Rights (YNCHR), have been representing the legal interest of the affected communities.

Characteristically, SRC/Socfin dismissed all the claims of the people, arguing that it followed all the legitimate steps to acquire the land. The company could not however show documents to support its arguments and wanted the CAO team to believe that records were destroyed during the Liberian Civil Wars.

The CAO team created room for the parties to negotiate, but the Company waived the option to submit to any negotiation with the affected communities, under the watch of the CAO team, according to the CAO assessment report of March 2020. In fact, Socfin went on to attack the credibility of the team, strangely accusing it of bias.

The Company said it had “significant misgivings” regarding the form and manner in which the CAO conducted its assessment and did not trust, impartial outcome, alleging in a statement said, “Both mediators selected by the CAO to assist with the assessment process had prior links to Green Advocates International and its founder, Alfred Brownell, in violation of the CAO’s Operational Guidelines.”

On June 29, 2020, the CAO released a communique acknowledging receipt of the Company’s concerns about the partiality of CAO’s local mediators. “To ensure appropriate action was taken to address these concerns, CAO’s Vice President reached out to the

local consultants in Liberia and considered input from before responding.” CAO noted its satisfaction that the assessment process had been conducted in “accordance with its Operational Guidelines.”

Considering the Socfin’s arguments about engaging with a CAO-led dispute resolution process, the complaint has now been forwarded to the Compliance Audit Function for appraisal, in keeping with CAO’s Operational Guidelines.

Mr. James Tellewoyan is one of the local mediators accused by Socfin/SRC of working for Green Advocates International. His offense is that he taught Francis Colee, a member of GAI staff back then. He admitted to training Francis, but wondered why SRC did not also mention the people on their staff that he also taught.

Tellewoyan told the Public Trust Media Group that “he and the Human Resource Manager of SRC [Jallah Mensah] know each other very well as they hail from the same county, the same district and that their towns are five to ten minutes’ walk apart. He asked “why didn’t he (HR)influence me?” He concluded by saying “I trained people from both sides, so let them balance the argument.” He wondered why SRC was not dealing with the issues raised by the affected communities, but was dwelling on him.



*SRC staff quarters*

“This first People’s Forum would not only give the people the opportunity to determine what happens to their land and natural resources, but it would also allow them to lead the process and map out strategies.”

– **Dr. John Kabia Program, Officer for Thematic Initiatives, Fund for Global Human Rights**

## MRU CSO Platform Alarms Over Political Insecurity in the Region -Condemns the Killing of Protesters in Nigeria



*Alfred Brownell*



*Dr. Michel Yoboue*



*Mr. Abu Brima*



*Chima Williams*

21 October 2020: The Mano River Union Civil Society Natural Resources Rights and Governance Platform (MRU CSO Platform) is alarmed over the rising political insecurity in the West African sub-region and calls for prompt actions to prevent any potential conflict. Of specific concern is the prevailing situation that has marred the election in Guinea, the killing of protesters in Nigeria and the looming fears ahead of elections in Côte D'Ivoire and Liberia.

The MRU Platform is a network of environmental and human rights defenders, indigenous people and grassroots activists, women and workers' unions, representing nine countries in West Africa, committed to improving and defending the lives of communities affected by corporate and government operations relative to land and natural resource exploitations.

In separate letters written to ECOWAS Commission, UN High Commission on Human Rights and the Secretary General of the

Mano River Union Secretariat, the Platform recalls past rowdy elections in the region which replay must be nipped in the bud.

The MRU CSO Platform also recalls the protests against the constitutional review of 22 March 2020, in Guinea that allowed the current president, Alpha Conde to run for a third term, resulting in considerable material damage, injuries and deaths.

Guinea has been on the edge since, with authorities deploying troops and closing the borders on the frontiers with Sierra Leone, Senegal and Guinea Bissau. Following the October 18 polls on Monday, gunshots were heard in the Capital, Conakry as supporters of opposition candidate, Cellou Diallo took to the streets to celebrate after he declared himself winner of the first ballot.

We are in this release further reinforcing our appeal for ECOWAS to act swiftly in forestalling a bloodbath in the region, by activating the

ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network consistent with Article 58 of the revised 1993 ECOWAS Treaty as defined by the Protocol, Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention of December 1999.

Our concern is especially about the humanitarian situation that comes with these political tensions, the loss of the lives of ordinary citizens, physical injuries, destruction of properties, the displacement and movement of refugees across the borders. It is in this vein we are calling for early robust interventions and monitoring.

The Lead Campaigner for Green Advocates International (GAI) based in Liberia and the 2019 Goldman Environmental Prize Winner for Africa, Alfred Lahai Brownell, Sr. lamented that "many defenders of the 2010 constitution that opposed a 3rd term bid of the incumbent Guinean leader were arrested, imprisoned, tried and convicted on frivolous criminal charges; we therefore called on the United

Nations and the Office for the High Commission for Human Rights(OHCHR) to help prevent the continuous violations of the rights of environmental and human rights defenders, including journalists, bloggers and political activists”.

Cote D’Ivoire is also concerning as the country heads towards the presidential election scheduled for 31st October 2020, the opposition has threatened a boycott of the polls, to be followed by actions of “peaceful civil disobedience.” There are worries about a relapse into widespread crisis in the country. Sadly, the situation in Cote D’Ivoire is sparked by another case of incumbent - President Alassane Ouattara who is controversially seeking a third term in office.

“We are encouraging the Mano River Union Secretariat and other stakeholders to act now to prevent these countries from undermining the peace, security and stability of a region that has suffered from historic conflicts,” Dr. Michel Yoboue, Executive Director, Extractive Industries Research and Advocacy Group of Cote D’Ivoire, added.

**“Many defenders of the 2010 constitution that opposed a 3rd term bid of the incumbent Guinean leader were arrested, imprisoned, tried and convicted on frivolous criminal charges; we therefore called on the United Nations and the Office for the High Commission for Human Rights(OHCHR) to help prevent the continuous violations of the rights of environmental and human rights defenders, including journalists, bloggers and political activists”.**

Elsewhere in Liberia, the MRU CSO Platform is equally wary of the growing incidents of electoral violence and dispute over the voters’ roll clean-up prompting a planned opposition protest, ahead of the mid-term senatorial elections on December 8, 2020.

These combined power plays in an already fragile region, could potentially explode and destabilize the region and therefore requires the immediate attention of stakeholders in the region and the international community.

Abu Brima of the Network Movement for justice and Development (NMJD) of Sierra Leone submits: “Our worries are not just about the lives of the struggling citizens across the borders who are grappling with socio economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also about the long-term political stability and development aspirations of the sister countries.”

West Africa is a classic example of how conflicts and instability starting in one country can spill over across borders. Urgent

steps must be taken to stop any possible conflict that would further worsen the human sufferings in the region.

Meantime, the MRU CSO Platform unequivocally condemns, the shooting and killing of protesters in Lagos, Nigeria who are demanding police reforms. “The reported use of live bullets by Nigerian security forces on citizens protesting against police brutality, is simply an act of banditry and a crime against humanity that should not go unpunished,” insists Chima Williams, Acting Executive Director of Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria.

The MRU CSO Platform urges Nigerian authorities and the Office for the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR), specifically the Special Rapporteur on Extra Judicial killings to launch an immediate investigation to identify and hold accountable the perpetrators of those killings.

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# More Pictures from Makeni People's Forum



*Dr. John Kabia & the Press*



### **Who are we:**

The Mano River Union Civil Society Natural Recourses Rights and Governance Planform (MRU-CSO Platform) is a network of environmental and human rights defenders; indigenou, urban slums and squatter communities; communities affected by the operations of multinational corporations; bloggers, labor unions and poor informal entrepreneurs on the frontline of corporate investments in West Africa. Its membership is drawn from nine of the fifteen countries in West Africa. Namely: Liberia, Sierra Leone, La Cote D'Ivoire, Guinea, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria, Niger and Senegal.

*The Natural Resource Watch is published by the Secretariat of the MRU CSO Platform, with headquarters at Green Advocates International (Liberia). Contact us @: Email: [mrucsoplatform@gmail.com](mailto:mrucsoplatform@gmail.com), Phone: +231 (0) 555139602/0886529611*