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Farmers seek independent inquiry into controversial Sierra Leone palm oil deal

By [REUTERS](#)

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By Olivia Acland

KOTUMA, Sierra Leone, March 29 (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - S ierra Leonean farmer Bockarie Swaray was sitting on his porch one morning when he heard a deep whirring noise and jumped up to see a bulldozer fell his banana, oil palm and kola nut trees.

"There was nothing I could do," he said, slumped on a plastic chair with a frown on his thin, lined face. "I just prayed to almighty God to help me."

Swaray said his 11 acres (4 hectares) of land, in Sierra Leone's southern Pujehun province, was taken to become part of a 45,000 acre (18,200 hectares) palm oil plantation run by international agro-investor Socfin.

But Socfin, which runs rubber and oil plantations in six African countries, maintains it respected all terms of an agreement with the government of Sierra Leone, one of the world's poorest nations, and all acquisitions were above board.

The Luxembourg-registered company, part of the empire of the French tycoon Vincent Bolloré, has been embroiled since 2011 in a feud with local landowners in the Malen chiefdom in Pujehun with landowners also fighting amongst themselves over the deal.

Now farmers and charities are demanding an independent investigation into the claims made by landowners who say their complaints and grievances were ignored.

"With Socfin everything has been shrouded in secrecy from day one," said Joseph Rahall, director of environmental charity and advocacy group Green Scenery.

A growing number of African land lease deals for mining and agribusiness have provoked tension and violence, with local communities claiming forcible eviction by foreign companies.

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Socfin's general manager in Sierra Leone, Philip Tonks, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that 40 landowner representatives with community support signed an agreement to lease the land.

"When we first came in we began discussions with the paramount chief because he is the custodian of the land. Of course in the early days there was mistrust, people didn't know who we were. Five years down the line we've built up that trust," said Tonks.

"We're seen as land grabbers but it was actually all done through consent."

Socfin has become the largest private employer in the West African country, employing more than 3,400 people from surrounding villages and providing extensive infrastructure projects and social services as well as jobs.

"LAND IS LIFE"

But Swaray said all but one of his 14 children have dropped out of school since he lost his land in 2011 because he can no longer afford the fees.

"For us, land is life," he said. "We are not educated but with the money from this land we were educating our children."

The family now lives on 500,000 Leones (\$68) his daughter, Abi, 23, earns each month working as a labourer for Socfin.

"If she doesn't work for them, then we don't eat," said Swaray, who is a member of the Malen Affected Land Owners Association (MALOA), which opposes Socfin's investment.

Mineral-rich Sierra Leone, with iron ore, bauxite, diamonds and titanium ore, has attracted foreign investors since its civil war ended in 2002 but has no system of land titling, leaving land decisions open to corruption, experts say.

A 2011 agreement, seen by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, shows the Malen chiefdom council, headed by Chief Braima Victor Sidi Kebbie, leased some land to the government for 50 years.

A 2013 agreement shows the government then sub-leased a slightly smaller parcel of land in the chiefdom to Socfin.

But residents say Socfin's annual payment of \$5 per acre (\$12.50 per hectare) is not enough and argue they did not understand the lease agreement - or were coerced into signing.

ARRESTS

When Socfin came to survey the land in October 2011, Swaray was among around 40 protesters arrested for blocking the road.

This was the first of six arrests of anti-Socfin protesters, who have been fined up to 20,000,000 Leones (\$2,720) each for "riotous behaviour", members of MALOA said.

Dozens were injured in 2013 when police opened fire on a group of armed protesters and two Socfin staff were shot at during a protest in 2015. Six activists were jailed in 2016 for destroying trees belonging to Socfin.

MALOA's leader, Shiaka Sama, an outspoken former member of parliament, spent three weeks behind bars in 2015 for cutting branches off Socfin's crops - charges he denies - and accused Socfin employees of trying to bribe him to back off.

Kebbie said he called a village meeting in 2011 in Sahn Malen, the main village of the chiefdom, to get consent from landowners' representatives before leasing the community's land.

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"Everybody was very happy," he said, sitting watching CNN in the airy living room of his vast two-year-old home.

"The company would create jobs and open up the chiefdom."

Seven out of 10 young people in Sierra Leone are unemployed, according to U.N. figures, and more than half of Sierra Leone's seven million people do not have enough to eat with Pujehun ranked as one of the most food insecure parts.

Others present at the meeting have different memories.

Farmer James Blango remembers standing up and asking what happened if people did not want to lease or sell the land to Socfin and being told by Kebbie to move live elsewhere.

Kebbie denied this.

"Those who leased their land signed for it," he said.

As Kebbie had little money in 2011, Socfin said it helped him, recognising his importance as the custodian of the land.

"We bought him a car," said Tonks. "He had to move about and talk to people if there were any issues."

Under the Socfin contract, each farmer received 1 million Leones (\$135) in compensation for the loss of their crops and \$2.50 a year for lease of each acre, said Tonks.

Another \$1 per acre goes to the chiefdom council, which is a local parliament, and to the district council, which can add up to some \$45,000 each for the whole plantation, Rahall said.

Tonks said he thought the deal was fair for the landowners.

"There will always be some opposition, like Sama and his followers, but those are muddy waters because he has political motives," he said. (\$1 = 7,350.0000 leones) (Reporting by Olivia Acland: Editing by Katy Migiro and Belinda Goldsmith; Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's rights, trafficking, property rights and climate change. Visit <http://news.trust.org> to see more stories.)

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